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A MAN OF NERVE; or, Caliban, the Dwarf.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "A HARD CROWD," "THE KIDNAPPER," "TIGER DICK," "ALWAYS ON HAND," ETC., ETC.



CALIBAN SNATCHED HIS BOWIE-KNIFE FROM ITS SHEATH AND ADVANCED A SINGLE STEP WITH A STAMP THAT MADE THE ROOM RING AGAIN.

A Man of Nerve;

OR,
CALIBAN, THE DWARF.

A Tale of Denver in her Heroic Age.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

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CHAPTER I.

A QUEER CUSTOMER.

DENVER in her Heroic Age!—i. e., at the height of her glory.

It is too early in the evening for her nightly orgies to be in full blast. Still there are a few loungers at the Miners' Delight, "h'istin' their pizen" a little languidly, selecting marks within easy range of tobacco-juice projectiles, and only now and then exchanging morose monosyllables across the tables on which they rest their elbows.

The door opens a little way, and a head is thrust in. The hair is very unkempt; the beard has known neither razor nor comb for many a day. The eyes have a wandering, furtive look, and seem to want to hide beneath the hat-brim—a very dilapidated affair indeed. They are hollow and have a hungry look, in keeping with the pale, emaciated face.

After a brief reconnaissance the body follows the head into the room. It is very thin, wasted by disease or want, and seems to shrink within its covering of rags, as if it would fain escape notice. The man advanced to the bar with a shambling gait, glancing nervously about, as if deprecating injury.

When this rather dubious customer ordered beer and bread in an almost pleading tone, the barkeeper showed none of his wonted alacrity, but looked him over from head to foot.

"Oh, I've got the dust to pay for it!" said the man, understanding the look.

After considerable nervous fumbling a small buckskin bag was produced, large enough, however, to hold much more than it evidently contained.

"It's only a little—I ain't rich," said the owner, with a sickly smile; "but it's enough to pay my footin', I reckon."

"You don't look rich, fur a fact!" commented the barkeeper, turning slowly to fill the order, with an amused glance at the other occupants of the room.

"Some as looks like beggars kin buy an' sell some as sports their b'il'd shirts an' store clo's," said a voice, coming in harsh gutturals from a corner of the room.

The man at the bar turned with his nervous smile and shrinking deprecation.

"That's a fact, pardner," he said, "but I reckon I hain't in no such luck. If I only have enough to keep soul an' body together, I don't complain."

He included the other loungers in his smile, as if seeking their approval, and, taking to the beer and bread, shambled off to a table by himself.

"You're a mighty thin shad, an' no mistake," pursued the voice from the corner. "I've seen men what looked like you before. Been prospectin'?"

The stranger stopped with the glass midway to his mouth, and set it down nervously.

"I've looked about a bit," he admitted.

"Hain't found nothin' to speak of, I reckon?"

The stranger started and looked frightened.

"No—no!" he stammered, seeming to shrink further within himself. "Luck's dead ag'in' me. It always was!"

Emptying his glass at a gulp, he put the remainder of his bread away in some receptacle among his rags, and rose hastily to pay his score.

There was half an ounce of the gold-dust; and at his request the barkeeper gave him his change in money.

Then he shambled out of the saloon, seeming to avoid looking at the man in the corner.

However, the keen eyes of the individual whose inquisitiveness had so disquieted him were regarding him from beneath beetling brows, like wolves lurking in ambush. A moment later he too rose and left the saloon.

It was a starlight night, the moon having not yet risen. The nervous stranger was dimly distinguishable shuffling off down the street. He glanced apprehensively back at the saloon door; but the man who had startled him had stepped within the shadow of the building.

Warily the "shadow" followed "his man" to the express office, where he saw him pass a buckskin bag across the counter and receive a receipt in return. Emerging he walked with a more assured step, less apprehensive and more engrossed in his own thoughts. Passing beyond the range of houses, he stopped on the riverbank, beneath a wide-spreading cottonwood, and there began to dance, and snap his fingers, and chuckle to himself. Once or twice he laughed aloud. Was the man crazy? At any

rate he was strangely happy for one whose rags fluttered in the wind.

When he had enjoyed his solitary meditations to his satisfaction, he turned back into the town, and curled up beneath a temporary shed to sleep.

With a contemptuous grunt the "shadow" left him and repaired to the express office, where the packages were being checked off, the stage coach having just arrived.

In a monotonous drawl the agent read:—

"Preston—Boston—gold-dust five hundred."

"Check!"

The "shadow" did not hear the name distinctly; but guessing at the facts from the rest, he snorted and worked his jaws with a sucking sound, like an enraged hog:

"Sluff! Sluff! Sluff!"

CHAPTER II.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

DAYS and weeks have passed. The sun is shining warm and bright. Its ardor is tempered by a refreshing breeze blowing from the West, where it has kissed yonder snow-capped peaks which seem to rest against the very sky, and then gather sweet balsamic odors from the pine-feathered crests nearer at hand.

The Overland stage-coach is already due; and more than one eye turns toward the East, where the crest of the slope on which the town is built bounds the horizon, when the crack of a whip, like the report of a pistol, announces its approach.

Down the smooth road sweeps the swaying vehicle, to fetch up before the hotel with that plunging and snorting of mettlesome chargers which has made the stage-driver a man of importance from time immemorial.

No one takes any interest in the fellow with a knapsack who has come to push his fortunes in the "gold-diggin's;" but when a young girl leaps lightly out, and turning, assists a lady who may be her mother to alight, every eye brightens with admiration, and bearded lips relax their stern set.

The girl, our heroine, is a fresh young blonde, with eyes of heaven's own blue, and, falling to her waist, light, fluffy hair, of that ineffable golden sheen over which poets rave and painters despair. Her eyes go over the strange, rude face of the people whom she has come among with a wondering half-smile which wins every heart; then she puts a supporting arm about her mother, who is evidently an invalid, and leads her into the hotel.

A word will tell all that need be known of the new arrivals at this point of our story. Failing in business, Mr. Preston had left his Boston home to retrieve his fortunes in the West. Later, he had sent for his wife and daughter, but for some reason failed to receive them at their point of destination.

Worn out by her fatiguing journey, the invalid soon sunk to sleep, and the girl went to the window, to gaze admiringly at the wondrous beauty of the mountain range, which rose peak on peak in the distance, and curiously at the unfamiliar sights presented in the street below.

There were rude miners in flannel shirts and heavy cowhide boots, looking brigandish enough, what with their unkempt beards and array of pistols and bowie-knives. There were Mexican rancheros, with their broad sombreros and gay-colored serapes and the ornate leather trappings of the vicious little mustangs, which they goaded with such merciless spurs and curbed with such cruel bits. There were one or two friendly Indians, with fierce stoicism and majestic step, looking as if they scorned their conquerors—how different from the broken-spirited vagabonds she had occasionally seen in the East, selling bead toys, or making mendicity a cloak for theft!

All these she viewed curiously, but she shrunk back with something like a shudder at sight of an object on the other side of the way.

It was a man whose short stature and distorted body showed him to be a dwarf, by some accident during childhood, rather than by nature. His breast protruded in front, corresponding to the ugly hunch on his back, leaving his huge head to sink into the hollow between his shoulders. His arms, which would have been long even had his body been perfectly developed, reached below his knees, and swung behind him as he waddled like the arms of a baboon. But it was his face that was most monstrous.

It was surrounded, almost hidden, by a tangled mass of hair and beard. The eyes looked woefully out from beneath shaggy, beetling brows. The jaws were massive, the mouth wide, with one yellow tusk protruding so as to shut down over the bestial lower lip. The effect was horrible when, under strong excitement, he champed his jaws like an angry hog.

How long he had been looking at her the girl did not know; but at last the burning intensity of his gaze attracted her eye to his, and with a sickening sense of horror she felt as if those terrible jaws were crushing her bones, while his fetid breath suffocated her.

Beauty and the Beast stood face to face, each fascinating the other, the one by his fiendish ugliness, the other by her sylph-like loveliness.

Would that terrible attraction entangle their lives?

The girl fled shuddering from the window; the dwarf drew a deep, rasping breath, tore his eyes away and moved on down the street, his eyes glowing like lambent flames, his hands clutching and tearing at each other, and his horrible jaws champing until flecks of foam stood on his repulsive lips.

God protect the innocent one, nor let her fall into the power of this ugly ghoul!

CHAPTER III.

THE DWARF'S WRONGS.

WHEN the stage-coach rattled up, the dwarf stood among the crowd in front of the hotel. Every eye being attracted by the beauty of the girl, no one saw how deeply the dwarf was affected.

With a stealthy movement he shrunk from sight behind the taller men, and peered at the girl between their bodies.

When the ladies had disappeared, he stepped to the hotel register and read the names inscribed in a fair, school-girl hand:

"MRS. JAS. K. PRESTON."

MISS CORA PRESTON."

A sudden hush fell upon the dwarf, as his greedy eyes drank in the names—a cessation of the breath and, it seemed, of the very beating of his heart. It was the paralysis of a masterful emotion—hatred!

"Preston! Preston! James K. Preston!" he repeated, not with his lips, but in his seething brain. "Preston—of Boston! and James K. Preston! Son of Colonel James K. Preston? A thousand million furies rend and tear him! An endless fire consume his vitals!"

"Hallo! What's the matter?" asked the landlord, staring at him, blankly.

In his fury the dwarf had clutched at the name on the register, so as to crumple the leaf.

With a scowl and something like a muttered oath, he turned away, and at the bar ordered brandy, which he swallowed at a gulp.

The crowd had lounged away from the front of the hotel by this time. Crossing the street, the dwarf caught sight of Cora at the window.

Her face wore a rapt look. She was drinking in the grandeur of the mountain scenery with an artist's appreciation.

With a strange blending of emotions the dwarf gazed at her. Now he scanned every lineament of her face to detect the Preston likeness, and his eyes flamed, his hands worked spasmodically, and his jaws champed and ground his teeth with rage. But anon her ethereal loveliness awed him into quiet—she looked so like an angel, with the westering sun falling upon her fair face and golden hair. A strange languor stole over him, and unconsciously his hands clasped themselves as if in adoration. A moment like this was followed by a whelming flood of sadness that made his lips quiver and his eyes grow humid. But ere the tears fell they were burned up by the fires of returning fury.

So she saw him, and, after one moment of sickening fascination, fled away.

"Revenge! Revenge! REVENGE!"

Hurrying down the street, he ground the words between his teeth, as if he were crunching her to atoms; his claw-like fingers clutched at one another, as if he were tearing her to shreds.

Then there was the *sluff! sluff! sluff!* of his working mouth, so horribly suggestive, as he strode on, looking neither to the right nor to the left, but straight before him into vacancy, until he had gained the outskirts of the town.

By this time he was quieted—at least, the passion of fury was allayed; but great beads of sweat stood on his forehead, and his hands were clasped in a convulsive gripe, while his brows were knit in a frown of pain.

"My God! how I love her!" he cried aloud, looking up into the heaven around which the curtains of night were fast falling, as if appealing to the God who sat enthroned beyond the stars that were coming out, one by one, in the empurpled canopy. "I would give life—ay! I would barter my soul for one smile—one caressing touch—one kiss—Oh, God!"

His face sank into his hands, while great sobs of agony shook his distorted frame.

Suddenly he tore away his hands in a fury of self-contempt, and with clenched fists, set teeth and blazing eyes, cried:

"Love! What am I, to talk of love? Ha! ha! ha!"—laughing with blood-curdling bitterness—"a toad!—a turtle!—a monster with just enough of humanity to be devilish!—a hideous parody on man at which dogs bark and from which children run shrieking with terror! HAH!"

With that fierce aspiration he clutched at his breast and stood glaring up at heaven, as if he would tear out his own heart and hurl it with scorn back into the teeth of the Power that had given it so ill-shapen a casket.

But that mood passed, and with an impatient gesture he said:

"Bah! Why do I take Heaven to task for what is the work of man? Did Heaven give me this misshapen trunk? No! I have been told that I was as comely a brat as ever saw

the light. And the hand that tore me from my mother's arms and dashed me to the ground had little to do with heaven, good wot! To his accursed hatred I owe my turtle shape! And shall I not repay him hate for hate? He is beyond my reach, gone to that torment he so well deserved. But he visited his hatred of the parent upon the innocent child. Shall I not profit by his lesson? He turned what might have been a man into a fiend; for would not so hideous a habitation—not to mention the scoffs and hatred, the contempt and fear of every living thing—distort the fairest soul ever created? Is it not meet, then, that his child, though in the second generation shall reap what he sowed? Is she too good to mate with the *thing* his hand made? Ha! I can gratify my love and my hate by a single cast.

"Revenge! Revenge! REVENGE!"

Far into the night this man whose hideous form set him apart from all mankind, an outcast from human sympathy and fellowship, strode under God's calm sky and meditated mortal vengeance for the wretchedness the hand of a fellow-mortal had brought upon him.

"And her father," he muttered—"the immediate heir to the debt I owe the devil who made me what I am! I must not overlook him. Where is he? And why are his wife and daughter in such a place as this alone? They know nothing of me. I could talk to the girl, and she would not dream that such a creature as I had ever crossed her grandfather's path. I must get acquainted with her and learn about her father."

After pondering a moment, he resumed:

"She is young. She has a tender heart. If I approach her as a friend—a benefactor, she will hide her fear and loathing, and, if I do not touch her, will not shudder or scream. She will pity my misfortune!"—with a withering sneer. Hah! curse the fate that cuts me off from all human tenderness save pity! I hate them that pity more than them that despise! And yet—oh, God! how I love her! I am such a dog that I crave a gentle look from her, even in pity!"

He sunk to the ground, to grovel in abject wretchedness, as he moaned:

"Years! years! without one grain of woman's love!—without one smile, without one touch in affection!—until my heart has burned itself to ashes with fruitless longing and hatred and wretchedness! I have been taunted with the sour wine of self-interested tolerance, with now and then an infusion of the gall of pity! Kicks and jeers and contumely were preferable to that! Oh, curse them all!"

In a frenzy of pain he leaped to his feet and grasped a young sapling and shook it, as if he held all humanity by the throat.

Calm by this outburst, he began again to plot the redress of the particular grievance which was the cause of all the rest; and when he again sought the town his plans were formed.

But the dwarf had scarcely turned from the spot which had witnessed his pain when a man appeared from the shadows near at hand. He was gaunt and hollow-eyed, made even more wild-looking by his unkempt hair and beard.

As he crept away he glared around him, as if fearing an enemy in every bush, and wringing his hands, he kept moaning piteously below his breath:

"My God! My God!"

CHAPTER IV.

A DEER, A RATTLESNAKE AND A TURTLE.

THE Miners' Delight, and at a table Caliban, the dwarf, opposite a young man who looked as if he expected—and deserved!—a kick from everybody—a man with whom gambling was a mania, and liquor as necessary as bread. Caliban's face was a mask of bronze; his opponent was flushed with success.

"You are in vein to-night," remarked the dwarf, quietly.

"Coming in I met a deer, a rattlesnake and a turtle," replied his opponent, smiling faintly, as if he thought the dwarf might help him read the "signs."

"Ah!" was the only reply vouchsafed. The next game was won by the dwarf. Bradley's "luck had changed." After that fortune varied, until Bradley leaned back against the wall, saying simply:

"Bu'sted!"

"You had your deer in your first rapid winnings. This is your rattlesnake. Your turtle—slow, but sure—comes last," said the dwarf, tempting him.

"I hain't got nothin' to stake, if a million was waitin' fur me in the next hand," said the gambler, ruefully.

"Your provisions?" suggested Caliban, shuffling the cards, knowing their music was like the voice of the Siren to the ears of his victim. Bradley's face brightened.

He "took a hand;" and his provisions went the way of his dust. He leaned against the wall again without a word.

The dwarf rapped on the table for more liquor.

"Your luck is bound to turn," he said. "Your turtle don't go for nothin'. There's your tools, they'll do for a stake. They ain't worth nothin' to me; but I'm willin' to give a man a show, if he's el'r grit. If he's a coyote—"

The dwarf finished the sentence with a significant shrug.

The coyote yielded to the temptation to prove himself not a coyote. As for the hopes based upon them, his mining implements were a rope of sand.

"It's mighty rough, I admit," said the dwarf; "but you stand it like a man. I reckon the old jade's jest a-tryin' of you, mad because she can't draw a whimper out of you. But she likes to see a man keep a stiff upper lip. When he shows that he can't be beat, and that he won't be beat, she turns square round and is powerful sweet on him, sometimes. And then there's that turtle—I stick to that. If you'd just stake your claim, now, she wouldn't have the cheek."

Bradley had been well plied with liquor. The dwarf opposed a heavy stake to the claim. Everybody knows—or thinks he knows (which amounts to pretty much the same thing)—that desperate men succeed when all others fail. Seeing a way to retrieve all his losses, the desperate gambler staked his claim, and, by the thief's code, lost all right and title thereto. It seemed that "the jade" had "the cheek" for almost anything that night.

"That finishes the game—and me!" said Bradley, his now ghastly face contorted by a sickly smile.

"I wish I could give you another show," said the dwarf.

"I hain't got nothin' but the clo's to my back," said his victim, with grim humor.

"Stake them."

Caliban spoke quietly, as if it were the commonest thing in the world to return to primitive nakedness for the gratification of the lust for gaming.

The ruined gambler laughed a hard, rasping laugh, as he asked:

"Will you wait for 'em till they pull me out of the river, to-morrow morning?"

"Yes."

"Deal away!"

The cards were run out.

The cards were played.

Whatever may have been the significance of the turtle, "the jade" left Mr. Bradley in a state to go out of the world with just what he brought into it.

"That turtle means something," said the dwarf, in seeming perplexity.

"It means that I'm a dog-gauned fool!" said Bradley bitterly.

The dwarf shook his head, while he shuffled the cards in an absent way.

Presently he looked up, with an idea.

"I kin give ye jest one more show," he said.

"I'd like to know whar my stake's comin' from," said Bradley, with a hard laugh.

"Put up your body!"

Bradley started and turned pale.

"Tush, man!" said the dwarf, impatiently. "What would it be to me, if I won? We can't hold white slaves in this country; so I could make no use of it alive; and dead—you don't think I'd have the carion on my hands? But I'm ready to give a man a show, when he shows such pluck."

"The "jade" was still coy; and Mr. Bradley's body became the property of his ghoul-like tempter.

His eyes glittering with the insanity of contemplated suicide, Bradley laughed a rasping laugh through his clenched teeth. With bitter sarcasm he asked:

"Is there anything else you want?"

The dwarf's eyes blazed; his teeth glittered through his shaggy beard; his fingers crooked like claws; he looked a very fiend, as leaning across the table, he hissed:

"YOUR SOUL!"

Bradley leaped from his seat with a gasping cry; and his lips livid, every nerve aquiver and his hand clutched in his hair, glared at the tempter.

The dwarf, still leaning across the table, laughed a ghoulish laugh, and his mouth began to go *sluff! sluff! sluff!* as if he were some hideous vampire eager to feast on the soul he craved.

"Are you the devil?" demanded Bradley, with a superstitious thrill.

"Yes!" cried the dwarf. "See!" and as if possessed by a very fiend, he struck a match and ignited the liquor in Bradley's glass.

"Drink!" he commanded, extending the glass, crowned with blue flame, to his horrified victim.

Bradley drew his breath in rapid gasps, and gazed at the flames as if fascinated.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the dwarf. "You did not interpret the oracle aright. You were to flee with the speed of a deer from a rattlesnake in the form of a turtle—that's me! Now it is too late! Come! come! your soul—it is inevitable!"

With a shiver, his tottering knees refusing to support him any longer, Bradley sank back into his seat.

CHAPTER V.

THE LITTLE JOKER.

SEEING the effect of his devilish words and actions, the mood of the dwarf changed. Putting his broad palm over the mouth of the glass, he smothered the flames, and leaning back, laughed heartily, yet with a tincture of savage bitterness.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! Do I play the devil well?" he asked.

And then:

"Come, Bradley! don't be a fool! I reckon I'd have to play with Satan for your soul, if I wanted it; for no doubt he jumped your claim to it a good while ago. But what I do want, and what you can give me, is your will. And I propose to play for it in this way:—you stake your will against this bag of dust; if you win, the dust is yours; if you lose the dust is still yours, but in exchange you do just what I want you to do!"

"Is it murder?" asked Bradley, with chattering teeth.

"Pah!" sneered the dwarf. "You haven't the courage for that. No! All I want is that you stand up and let me kick you until I am satisfied. Come! is it a go?"

Bradley was too much bewildered to answer.

"I promise not to ask you to injure any man," pursued the dwarf. "Here is the gold-dust—it was yours two hours ago—and this glass stands for your will. There they are in the pot, and here are your cards. Come! what do you do?"

Caliban dealt the cards rapidly.

Mechanically Bradley took his hand. In a moment he had forgotten his past losses, his present strange stake—everything—in the excitement of the game.

Again he lost!

He looked helplessly up to his successful opponent.

The dwarf pushed the bag of gold-dust across the table into the hand of the gambler (who received it mechanically) and arose from the table.

"There's your dust," he said, "and the first thing I demand of you is that you drop your fool notion of suicide. I've got work for you; and I won't have it spoiled by any of your nonsense. When I am done with you—then you can go hang, if you like. For the present, have something to drink."

After a week of anxious waiting for the husband and father, Mrs. Preston left the more expensive hotel life, and took a cottage, where Cora's needle could support them. Forming the acquaintance of a gardener's sick wife, living a mile out of the town down the Platte, Cora visited her nearly every day, fearing no danger in her lonely walk, knowing nothing of the lynx-eyed ghoul who crouched among the alder-bushes as she passed, biding his time.

Fascinated by his love for her, the dwarf had devised a mock rescue, hoping to win her friendship through her gratitude. His tool, the coyote, Bradley, was ever at his side.

One day Cora was detained longer than usual. The stars were already lit when she came along, singing softly to herself.

"Now is our time!" muttered the dwarf. "Come! out with you into the road!"

Bradley shivered with dread of what might follow, if it became known that he had insulted a woman for whom every one in Denver was ready to fight; but a black scowl from the dwarf and the partial drawing of a bowie-knife goaded him to desperation, and he stepped forth from the bushes.

Finding herself suddenly confronted, Cora started from her meditations with a quick lifting of the hands and a suppressed cry.

"Hallo, pretty one!" exclaimed Bradley, with a drunken leer. "My eye! but you gave me a start. What are you doin' off hyar at this time o' night? Does yer mother know ye're out?"

"Let me pass, sir!" said the girl, drawing herself erect with dignity.

Her little heart was all aflutter; but she hoped that a bold front might command respect.

"Oh, now, but you'd ought to have company, you know. Let me see you home—do!"

And her persecutor advanced with extended hand.

It was only a woman, and after the first plunge he began to pluck up heart and enter into the spirit of the fun.

"I want none of your company, sir," said Cora. "How dare you interfere with me? Let me pass, I say!"

But she retreated backward before his advance.

"Pshaw, now! Won't take my arm?" laughed Bradley. "Well, if I've offended you, let us kiss an' make up."

The girl turned and walked more rapidly in the direction from which she had come, looking back at her assailant over her shoulder, paling with apprehension.

Chuckles and rubbing his hands with ghoulish glee, the dwarf emerged from the bushes, yet kept within the shadow of the trees, to follow them.

"You shall repent this insult!" said Cora, still bravely. "For the last time will you stand out of my path and let me pass?"

"Not without a kiss, my beauty!" said Bradley, and extending both arms he strode rapidly toward her.

With a scream, Cora sped away in panic-stricken flight.

A few bounds and the arms of her pursuer closed about her.

"Oh! oh! oh! oh!" went up her piercing screams, as she struggled helplessly.

"Now for it!" chuckled the dwarf, and he was about to spring to the rescue, when he was startled by a clear, ringing shout just behind him; and as he shrunk back into the bushes he was passed by a form that cleared the ground in great leaps.

The next instant Bradley was collared by an iron hand and kicked by a foot in nowise lacking vigor, through the bushes and down the river-bank into the water.

"By all the gods of war!" chuckled the dwarf who was not wanting in a sense of humor, "but that was done as neatly as I could have done it myself!"

Then, as a perception of its effect on his plans flashed across his mind, he muttered:

"I held the right bower; but this fellow has played the Little Joker. By the furies! I am eunched!"

And his eyes flamed beneath brows as black as night; his hand grasped the hilt of his bowie-knife; and his mouth began to *sluff! sluff! sluff!*

CHAPTER VI.

CORA PRESTON DISAPPEARS.

WHEN Cora Preston felt herself freed from the grasp of the dwarf's tool, she stood in breathless expectancy.

Having kicked her assailant into the water, the broad-shouldered athlete who had so opportunely come to her rescue emerged from the bushes and stood again before her in the starlight, hat in hand.

"Miss," he said in a brisk, cheery voice, "I reckon that fellow won't trouble you any more; but, seeing that you've had a little fright, if you'll accept me as an escort, it'll be a pleasure to see you safely home."

His voice thrilled her (as the voice of the Prince always does the first time he and Beauty meet) and she had not a particle of fear of him, though he was a stranger.

But she heard Bradley floundering in the water, and instantly was all concern, without a bit of resentment.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed. "Will he not drown?"

"Drown? Oh, no. Never fear but he'll crawl out and sneak off, like the cowardly coyote that he is."

The young man spoke lightly, in an off-hand way that pleased Cora not a little.

"I suppose you were going this way?" he said, turning toward the town.

"Yes," she replied, walking demurely at his side.

One swift glance had shown her a man of perhaps twenty-five, with square-built, muscular frame, in a miner's dress of flannel shirt open at the throat, trowsers tucked into the tops of heavy boots and supported at the waist by a belt, which also held a pistol at the back and a bowie-knife at the hip; a head, poised firmly on a neck which rose like a column from his massive shoulders, and crowned by jet-black hair lying in rings which the wind lifted lightly; a face shaded by a full beard and lighted by a pair of fun-loving eyes.

Out of the corner of her eye Cora noted the free sweep of his step, as they walked along. She found, too, that her eyes were just on a line with his shoulder. How strong and fearless he seemed. It would be so nice to have just such a brother! Only—with a little flush—she felt conscious of a sense of gladness that he was not her brother.

As for the stranger, he looked at his pretty companion with nothing of the awkward embarrassment of a rustic. He looked as if he would be at his ease in any company, with the nobility of conscious manhood.

Just now he was saying to himself:

"By Jove! ain't she about as dainty as they make 'em? Everett, old boy, you're in luck! Here you've rescued the queen of the fairies, and—"

Aloud he said:

"Everybody knows that it would be awfully naughty to be seen home by a gentleman that you hadn't been introduced to; so I'll just say: Miss Preston, allow me to present to you Mr. George Everett!—Mr. Everett, Miss Preston!—Madam, I am delighted to make your acquaintance!—and it's all done, don't you see? I know your name, though I have never had the pleasure of seeing you before; for of course it would be silly for me to ask you if you are not the lady whom they call Beauty, when my own eyes are sufficient evidence."

The implied compliment—a little broad, it must be confessed—was delivered in a sportive way that redeemed it from rudeness.

As if he had been a friend since childhood, the girl looked up into his laughing face and began impulsively:

"Who calls me—?"

She broke off abruptly, the conscious blood streaming over neck and brow and her eyes falling in painful embarrassment.

"Oh, everybody!—myself included," laughed Everett.

Cora bridled, just the faintest bit, and then bowed a little stiffly.

"Thank you, Mr. Everett!" she said, in a tone whose significance could not be mistaken.

Her companion was amused by her pretty assumption of dignity; but he liked her the better for it.

"I beg your pardon," he said, with sudden seriousness; "but we of the West are perhaps a little free and easy with our tongues, like our prairie winds."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Cora was electrified by a pistol-shot which seemed to be at her very ear, and she saw her companion fall heavily to the ground. But the scream died on her lips.

So bewildered was she that she did not hear the snarling ejaculation, like the cry of some animal, nor the rending of the bushes, as a dark form leaped into the road. But she felt herself grasped by a pair of arms that closed about her like steel bands—felt herself raised bodily from the ground, and then overcome by terror and dismay at the supposed death of her protector of a moment before, she swooned, without so much as seeing her assailant.

Meanwhile Bradley had dragged himself from the water in no amiable mood. But he had scarcely time to take an inventory of his hurts, when he heard the report of a pistol, followed by a quickly stifled scream.

"The devil has shot her!" he exclaimed, and started in the direction of the sound.

He advanced with great caution, eager to see what had occurred, yet not wishing the dwarf to discover that he was witness to a deed which might make it to the interest of the other to put him out of the way; but, in turning a bend in the road, he unexpectedly came upon a scene which made him wish himself miles away.

By the starlight he could discover the form of a man lying in the road, and the dwarf standing over him his repulsive mouth going *sluff! sluff! sluff!* as was usual when he was in great excitement or rage.

Before Bradley could shrink to cover, the dwarf caught sight of him, and with a harsh ejaculation bounded toward him.

In abject terror Bradley took to his heels; but his wet clothing impeded his movements, and by the time the chase had gone half a mile he felt a heavy hand on his collar. Instantly he dropped upon his knees.

"Mercy! Mercy!" he cried. "For the love o' Heaven, don't kill me! I didn't see nothing, and you know I wouldn't say nothing, if I did. Only—"

"You cowardly cur! is it you?" cried the dwarf jerking him to his feet. "I have a mind to let some o' the water out o' yer veins for leading me this chase all for nothing."

"Don't! don't!" began the coyote, trembling so that his knees knocked together; but the dwarf shook him into silence and demanded:—

"Did any one pass you with the girl?"

"No; I haven't seen any one."

"Come back with me, and help me search for her. Some one has carried her off. Come! step lively!"

They found Geo. Everett still lying unconscious in the road. After beating the bushes in the vicinity and looking out over the plain, the dwarf gave over the search as hopeless.

"Whoever took her has had plenty of time to make off with her while you led me on that stupid chase, thinking that you were the rascal," muttered the dwarf, discontentedly.

Bradley did not understand the situation at all; but feeling it incumbent upon him to say something, and anxious to free himself from all possible blame, he said, deprecatingly:

"I haven't seen anything o' the girl since you kicked me into the river."

"Since I kicked you into the river?" repeated the dwarf, in surprise.

"Yes," replied Bradley, a little inclined to resent the extent to which the indignity had been carried. "I hope you got your money's worth."

"Faith, I never kicked you!" cried Caliban.

"The deuce you didn't!"

The dwarf laughed, in spite of the gravity of the moment.

"No! You must be crazy."

"Well, perhaps I was dreaming," replied Bradley, ruefully; "but it has left me feeling mighty sore—unless I'm asleep yet."

At that the dwarf roared with laughter.

"You may laugh," said Bradley, dolefully; "but it's no matter for me to make merry over."

"You blasted fool!" cried the dwarf, as he could fetch breath, "are you blind or drunk, that you do not know that it was not I who kicked you?"

At the explanation which followed, Bradley looked more crestfallen than ever.

"I reckon I've filled my part o' the bill, an' this hyar performance hasn't got to be gone through with again," he said, anxiously forecasting the future.

"There's salve for whatever bruises you have

received," said the dwarf, tossing some coins in his discomfited tool. "You needn't be afraid that the same programme will be produced twice. I am done with you for to-night; but the game ain't played out yet."

"I hope the next hand will have more trump and fewer bumps!" said Bradley, his spirits rising in contemplation of the number of drink the money he had just received would buy.

"But mind you," cautioned the dwarf, with an ominous frown, "not a word about this business!"

Bradley was profuse in assurances; but when he was alone he muttered:

"Maybe you've pulled the wool over my eyes, and maybe you hain't! If that girl ever turns up again, I reckon you won't be far off."

Was Bradley right? Had the dwarf already got the beautiful girl in his power?

CHAPTER VII.

A COOL HAND.

AND now, dear reader, it is time to introduce to you the man who is to play the part of the evil magician in our drama.

He was a small man, certainly not above the average height and of very slender build. The epithet *elegant* most aptly describes him. He had small hands, daintily white and with carefully kept nails. His feet, unusually small, were incased in patent-leather boots. His figure was straight and symmetrical, shown to the best advantage by the dress of a gentleman in an eastern city. His hair was a glossy chestnut brown, as fine as Cora's own, and of that character which can be arranged by running the fingers through it. His forehead was smooth and white; his brows delicately penciled; his gray eyes penetrating, yet not unpleasantly so; his nose straight with flexible nostrils; his mouth shaded by a carefully trained mustache, the color and fineness of his hair, below which his even white teeth showed when he smiled—a very engaging smile.

By all the known rules of the ologies and nomies Mr. Ethelbert Grayson *ought* to have worn cloven hoofs and a tail, and at least rudimentary horns—but he did not; his nails *ought* to have been trimmed to a point—on the contrary, they were finely oval; his eyes *ought* to have been near together, beneath tufted brows, and pointing to the end of his nose, which *ought* to have been hooked, and his mustaches *ought* to have pointed upward, following the angle of a pointed chin—none of which peculiarities, as a fact, distinguished him from an ordinary gentleman, with the ordinary admixture of good and evil, redeemed from effeminacy, which might have been expected from his delicate proportions, by a certain steadiness of the eye which proclaimed the master-spirit.

This was to be George Everett's opponent. Would the true prince, or the magician, win?

The dwarf was so deep in the meditation of future plots, as he passed through the town, that he paid no heed to the persons he met. He was abruptly recalled to the present by a peculiar whistle.

He stopped as if shot, turning his head but slowly, yet his eyes glaring around with a vigilance which let nothing escape them.

"Perdition! Has he come again? Have I not been harried enough?" he muttered, savagely.

Then his roving eyes discerned Grayson, and fastened upon him with burning intensity.

If Mr. Ethelbert Grayson had given the signal, he gave no indication of it now. He sauntered leisurely along, without seeming to have noticed the dwarf.

Nevertheless the latter turned and followed him—at a distance yet keeping him in sight.

On the outskirts of the town, Ethelbert Grayson inserted a key into the door of a cabin a little removed from its neighbors, and entered, closing the door behind him. His cigar afforded sufficient light to enable him to find his way across the otherwise dark room, to a lounge or bunk upon which he threw himself on his back, clasping his hands comfortably at the back of his head.

Presently the dwarf entered without knocking, closed the door, and stood in the darkness with his back against it.

"Well?" he said, simply.

A remarkable change was noticeable in his voice. It was as harsh as ever; but its boldness seemed sapped. However, through its cowed humility ran a thread of fierce, rebellious hatred. It was as if the tiger snarled while yet he licked his master's foot.

Grayson seemed careless of this; for, without changing his position, he said, lightly:

"I see you are here."

"Needs must when the devil drives!" snarled the dwarf.

"Are you surly as ever, Caliban?" laughed his master, unconcernedly.

"What matters the humor of your slave, so that he does your bidding?"

"True."

The perfect contempt of Grayson's answer lay in the quiet indifference with which he acquiesced in the dwarf's savage words.

Caliban, as he had been called, writhed as if a hand had been laid on a poisoned dagger that

rankled in his vitals. If looks could annihilate, the deadly glances that darted from his blood-shot eyes through the darkness at that easily-reclining figure, faintly discernible when the cigar glowed, would have burned the Magician to nothingness.

There was an interval of silence, in which the dwarf breathed hard, while his master rolled the cigar meditatively in his mouth. Then the latter spoke:

"It is needless for me to seek confirmation of my suspicion that you 'shook' me with the purpose of severing our connection for good and all?"

"Slaves have tried to burst their chains before!" snapped the dwarf.

"And failed!"

There was a touch of the iron in Grayson's just perceptible emphasis, but he went on, smoothly:

"A little ungracious of you?"

"Did I ever owe you allegiance?—for what, pray?" demanded the dwarf, hotly.

"Oh, my dear Caliban, everything!" laughingly.

"For instance—"

"My company, Cal."

"Your tyranny!"

"A name!" with a shrug. "But is there no honor in serving such a master?"

"There is little honor in the dirty work you have imposed!"

"All are not born to the scepter, you know, and the dirty work must be done by somebody. And I have requited your services."

"Not by gold!" with a cutting sneer.

"Ha! ha! ha! Well, no—not by gold, and that's a fact. The 'filthy' has for the most part passed the other way, I grant you. But, as I said, you have been permitted the intimacy of a gentleman—"

"The refining influence of whose society is something!"

"Yes. Ha! ha!—"

"For which condescension most humble thanks!"

The stinging irony in the dwarf's deliberate enunciation amused his master hugely.

"You are in an unusually appreciative mood to-night," he laughed.

"Pray proceed," sneered the dwarf. "Have my slight services received any further recognition than this etherealizing influence of your worshipful society?"

"H'm! I always say 'Thank you!'—don't I?"

Grayson spoke a little impatiently.

"Most surely! But even that may not be all."

There was an interval of silence.

When Grayson spoke his voice was as smooth as silk; but the darkness covered a steely glitter of the eyes that bespoke cruel purpose.

"It is not," he said, simply.

Knowing him so well, and but for the towering passion he was in, the dwarf might have been warned by the sudden quiet in his master's voice. As it was, he rushed madly on.

"Well?"

"I have repaid you in one other way."

"My gratitude awaits your announcement."

"And I must jog your memory?"

"I beg your most gracious pardon!—yes."

"Well, then, by raising your daughter from—"

"PERDITION!"

The word shot forth like a thunderbolt. The dwarf snatched his bowie-knife from its sheath and advanced a single step with a stamp that made the room ring again. His fang-like teeth were bared; his eyes seemed to dart living flame; and his breath came and went with a bursh, hissing sound; while his stunted form was crouched so as to be scarcely higher than the table.

His master never moved a muscle, nor deigned so much as a look. His head was in the lion's mouth; but he seemed sure of his power.

"Well, no—not from perdition," he said, carelessly; "but from the degradation of savage life, to become the—the companion of a Christian gentleman."

Then a death-like silence fell between them.

CHAPTER VIII.

GRAYSON'S BANKER.

IT was a weird interview there in the inky darkness, where the dwarf's passion-distorted face was invisible, and the composed features of his master were faintly illuminated and then obscured as he puffed slowly at his cigar.

The dwarf had sustained a terrible shock, and recovered slowly.

Grayson gave him time.

The minutes dragged slowly by; yet neither spoke.

When Grayson's cigar had burned nearly to his lips, he lighted a second, and threw the stump into the fire-place.

Caliban's eyes followed the parabolic curve described by the moving point of light, and then returned to the one which glowed intermittently above Grayson's face.

He was now standing erect—as erect as his deformity permitted; his knife had been thrust back into its sheath; his eyes had returned to their old light of dull, brooding hatred; his

breath came more evenly. His voice was under control when he said, at last:

"What do you want with me?"

"An old want, Caliban," said his master, as if nothing unusual had passed between them.

"Gold, of course."

"Of course."

"You never soil your lily fingers getting it yourself!"

"Why should I, when I have so bounteous a purveyor?"

"Why indeed!" sneered the dwarf.

"You never fail me, Caliban."

"How much do you want?"—sharply.

"Oh, you know best,"—with a yawn.

"It's a pity to trouble your radiant effulgence to name a sum!"

"You know I hate details. Get me all you can."

"A pound?"

"Yes—or ten pounds."

"Any where from two hundred and fifty to twenty-five hundred dollars!"

"Don't higgle! You know it costs nothing."

"One would think you had unlimited coffers at your command."

"They are limited only by the bounds of this delightful oasis of civilization in the desert of barbarism—Denver and vicinity!"

"And their contents are accessible by means of—"

"Skilled labor! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Yes—akin to that which picks locks and opens safes—"

"Or veins, Caliban!—or veins!"

"Ah!"

A pause; then:

"How soon do you want this gold?"

"To-night."

"The time is short."

"That's your affair."

"Say to-morrow, at noon."

"That won't do. I must have it to-night."

"Suppose our patron, the devil, fails to throw in my way some fool who is willing to give me his dust, under the delusion that he is getting the cards fortune—not art!—deals him?"

"Bah! my good fiend, have I ever stipulated how you should get the gold? All I say is—get it!"

"Ah!"

Another silence.

Then Grayson throws his cigar away, yawns, turns his face to the wall, and terminates the interview by a careless:

"Good luck to your venture!"

"And pleasant dreams to your worshipful highness!" sneers the dwarf, as he steps through the doorway from the rayless darkness within to the starlight without, closing the door after him.

Then all is silence and darkness in the cabin. Grayson breaths so lightly that he cannot be heard.

Five minutes pass.

A stealthy hand is laid on the latch. The door opens with a faint creaking of the hinges. A slight figure glides in like a shadow.

The door closes. Again all is silence and darkness.

But we must follow the dwarf.

"Curse him!" he muttered. "He is upon me again! I shall never escape him!"

"Oh! to be a bond-slave, with the power to rend!—with the will to annihilate!—with every incentive that can move to crush!—and yet to have the heart of a coyote! To groan under wrongs that make every nerve quiver, every pulse thrill—and yet to have the blood turn to water when it comes time to strike! To be spit upon! to be spurned! and to lick the foot that spurns!"

"HAH! What is the power by which he binds me? How does he make me cringe to him, as they say the lion will crouch before a royal babe? By what subtle arts does he sap my strength and blight my courage? I that dare take the devil by the throat!

"I am his Caliban! I bear his burdens! I come and go at his behest, while he has his foot on my neck!"

"HAH! Curse him!—curse him!—curse him!"

Notwithstanding his fierce hatred of Grayson, he had no thought of failing to get him the gold he required.

From saloon to saloon he passed, looking for a victim. He found only one who was at all promising; and by half past nine o'clock he rose from the table, five ounces of dust—the miner's "pile"—having changed ownership.

According to custom, he treated the man he had fleeced to a drink of liquor, and they parted company.

"A drop in the bucket!" muttered the dwarf contemptuously, as he again passed out into the night. "It is hardly enough to whet the appetite of that cormorant. I must make a bold stroke somehow."

At that moment he discovered a man peering in at the window of a saloon across the way.

Something familiar in his appearance made the dwarf stop and scrutinize him more closely.

The man turned and glanced about him apprehensively, his face being revealed in the light from the saloon window.

"Hah!" ejaculated the dwarf, and instantly glided across the street and crept nearer, keeping well in the shadows.

As if satisfied with his reconnoissance the man entered the saloon.

A moment latter the dwarf was peering in through a hole in the curtain which screened the lower part of the window.

He saw the man at a table eating ravenously, and drinking with lips that quivered with eagerness, while his hand trembled with weakness. He was in rags, and looked as if nearly starved.

"By dame Fortune's self! the odd fish who dines off a crust of bread and a sup, sends five hundred dollars away by express, and then chuckles and dances, and snaps his fingers all by himself in the starlight!" muttered the dwarf, his eyes glittering with avaricious anticipation. "This is my master's banker, just come to town!"

CHAPTER IX.

WA-HE-TA.

A DEAD silence reigns in the darkened cabin when the mysterious visitant creeps in following the exit of the dwarf.

Presently a soft glow is diffused near the door. Out of the gloom appears, faintly illuminated, a darkly beautiful face—the face of an Indian maiden. There is an expectant look in the black, restless eyes, and the lips are apart, as though the bosom were palpitating apprehensively.

The effect is a little startling, since we see nothing but a face, like a mask suspended in the air. More startling still, we get but a glimpse and it disappears.

But now we see a center of light as large as the palm of one's hand. Drawing near, the strange phenomena are explained. An Indian girl is guiding her steps across the room by the light of a bit of phosphorescent wood held in her hand.

She stops when she catches sight of Grayson lying just as the dwarf left him.

"He sleeps!" she whispers, and draws near to him.

A pistol, lying close to his hand, as if his fingers had just relaxed from its butt, shows us the secret of his self-possession while torturing the dwarf. He could have put a bullet through his slave before the latter could cross the room to him.

Perhaps the girl half suspected the significance of the pistol. She shudders, looking at it.

But her eyes turn from it to his face, and instantly melt with tenderness.

He seems sleeping as peacefully as an infant.

One hand, as fair and delicate as a woman's, lies at his side. The maiden kneels, touches it lightly with her lips, and starts back looking frightened. Then she watches his face, throwing the light of her phosphorescent wood upon it.

"Sa-lo-wa-no!"*

The vowels rippled over her tongue in liquid music, following each other in gliding cadences of love.

"Well, Wa-he-ta,† I see that you are here."

He spoke without opening his eyes, showing that he had not been asleep.

The girl started violently, the words were so unexpected.

"I am here," she murmured, yet looking at him as if uncertain with what sort of reception she would meet.

"Have done with this ghost play," he said, now opening his eyes. "Strike a light."

While the girl complied, he rose to a sitting posture and put the pistol in the breast pocket of his coat.

A moment later the maiden was crouching at his feet, looking up into his face with much of deprecation.

Ethelbert Grayson looked at her critically, as if comparing her features with some other face which he held up before his mental vision. She was certainly very beautiful, so far as physical charms went. Fairer than an Indian of the full blood, the ruddy hue of health glowed in either olive cheek. She was not lacking in vivacity; yet, if he was comparing her with Cora Preston, she was at a disadvantage, wanting that intellectual light which transcends mere physical perfection.

"Why have you followed me?" he asked, presently, with something of impatience.

"Is it not dark and cold when the sun is hidden?" asked the girl in the picturesque metaphor of her race.

With almost the fawning of a spaniel she took his hand and pressed it to her lips.

He submitted to the caress with cool indifference.

"Am I not to be obeyed? I indicated—with sufficient clearness, I thought—that I did not desire your company."

"Does my presence displease you, then? Once your smile greeted me as gladly as the morning sun kisses the rippling stream."

The girl spoke sadly, with deprecating tears in her eyes.

* The Morning Sun.

† Limpid Water.

Grayson yawned.

"There are days and seasons," he said. "The sun covers his face with clouds, and the stream rests beneath ice."

"Wa-he-ta never closes her heart to her sun!" protests the girl eagerly. "Come! let me clear away the clouds."

With playful fondness she rises, with a gliding motion nestles at his side, puts her arms about his neck, and so, reclining on his breast, looks coaxingly up into his face.

A look of dreamy admiration comes into his eyes, as he lifts a tress of her raven hair, straight as any Indian's yet not coarse.

Thus encouraged the maiden draws his face to hers until she can touch his lips, then nestles her face in his neck, with a little rippling murmur of delight believing that she has made her peace with him.

But a vision of Cora Preston's ethereal loveliness flits before his mind. By contrast the wild-flower on his breast seems mean. Almost rudely he disengages her clinging arms and puts her from him.

"There—that will do. I am tired now. Tell me how you followed me."

With a pained shrinking the girl submitted, sitting apart from him while she talked. Her lips were tremulous, her eyes sad and pleading, but she did not risk offending him by any further caresses.

By-and-by he said:

"Wa-he-ta, you cannot stay here. It is my wish that no one should know of my relations with you."

"But you will not send me away from you?" pleaded the girl, with clasped hands. "You will let me stay where I can see you? I should lie down and die if I could not look upon your face!"

"Do as you have a mind to, but we must never be seen together. No one must even see that I know you. Now leave me. I wish to be alone."

He rose to his feet, about to pace the floor.

The girl approached him with her willowy form bending into flexures of deprecating love.

"Show Wa-he-ta that she has not offended you," she pleaded. "Then she will go and look upon you only from a distance."

"There! there!" he said, extending his hand to her.

With sudden passion she leaped to his side and drew his arm about her.

"So! so!" she cried, and without further warning fell to sobbing on his breast and clinging to him.

"Confound the women! They are all alike," muttered Grayson. "The other, though, won't have to woo me like this!"

Of his own accord he lifted the girl's face and kissed her quivering lips.

"Are you content?" he asked.

"My sun, I lay my hair under your feet!" cried the girl.

And in the abandonment of her love she actually knelt and trailed her long hair on the ground before him.

When she was gone he knit his brows and muttered:

"That is the soft side of her nature. But these half-breeds are devils for extremes of passion. What if she becomes jealous of this lily which I mean to pluck? Will she show her fangs then?"

As he mused a cruel light came into his eyes, and for a moment his lips set hard.

"Well," he muttered, "I fancy I can find means to draw them for her. Ten thousand Wa-he-tas should not stand between me and the accomplishment of my purpose!"

Almost instantly the muscles of his face relaxed, and he was a quietly-smiling gentleman.

Presently the lifting latch indicated the dwarf's return.

CHAPTER X.

A TERRIBLE ORDEAL.

ETHELBERT GRAYSON's banker, as he was styled by the chuckling dwarf, ate as ravenously as on the occasion when he was first introduced to the reader. When he had in a measure appeased his hunger, he again went into the street, passing within a yard of the crouching form of the dwarf.

Now the Unknown walked with his head on his breast and a look of troubled thought on his face. Ever and anon he put his hand to his head as if to revive some faded recollection.

So the dwarf followed him through the darkness, and choosing the time and place dealt him a treacherous blow from behind with the butt of his pistol. Without warning the blow came; without seeing his assailant, the Unknown sunk to the ground.

Caliban returned the weapon to its holster, and bending over his prostrate victim, began to rummage his ragged clothing.

"Now, let us see if you are a walking gold-mine," he muttered. "Pah! Not two ounces in the cursed thing! You confounded fraud—Eh? What's this? Here's luck—a ragged coat with a golden lining! The old miser!"

Chuckling, he eagerly cut away portions of the clothing of the unconscious man, putting

them into his own pockets. When he was satisfied that there was no more of value, he left his victim and sought his master with the prize gained.

He had nearly reached the cabin, when he caught sight of a figure with fluttering drapery, which he recognized. With a spring he caught the figure by the arm.

The figure struggled violently, with a suppressed cry. Then the blade of a knife glinted with the light from a distant saloon window.

But he caught the supple wrist, and with a single word quieted his captive.

"My father!" exclaimed Wa-he-ta; for it was she.

"What are you doing here, girl?" he demanded angrily.

"Can you ask? Because I love the Morning Sun."

"Hah!"

The dwarf uttered his customary rasping ejaculation of rage.

"Let go my wrist. You hurt me," cried the girl, wincing with pain.

"It were better if it were thy throat in my grasp!" snarled the dwarf.

"I know your hatred for him I love," began the girl.

But the dwarf interrupted her.

"Pah! Talk not of love. You should hate him as I do."

"Has he not been kind to me? Why should I hate him? He is the light of my life!"

"He is your destroyer! He is a foul bog into which you have fallen! HAH! and I stand by and dare not strike. Oh, coward! coward! worse than fool!"

He struck his clenched hand against his forehead, and his mouth worked with that horrible slushing sound which marked his paroxysms of fury.

With a sudden wave of tenderness and remorse, he drew the girl to him to weep over her, as any father might have done. In that moment of supreme emotion he forgot his deformed body. Only the soul of the parent sought expression in the most natural way. But he had a fearful reminder.

Taken unawares and brought into contact with that monstrous body, the girl uttered a gasping cry of revulsion and shrunk away, tearing herself from his grasp with a frantic energy of terror and loathing. When she had gained a little distance from him, the girl stopped, shuddering.

The dwarf stood perfectly still for a moment, and then burst into a soul-chilling laugh, such acrid bitterness, such scathing hatred ran through it.

"A toad caressing a butterfly!" he cried, with horrible self-abasement. "Ha! ha! ha! ha! Bah! the lily springs from the mire; but who shall condemn the flower if it shrinks from contact with the filth that nurtures it?"

And addressing the girl:

"Come! I do not blame you. You but obey an instinct stronger than the tie of blood over which fools waste so much sentiment, blind to the fact that in nine cases out of ten the strongest soul friendships and this vaunted bond of kindred do not co-exist. Ugliness is always repulsive, and rightly so. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, for me, your mother was blind, and so tolerated me as she would have tolerated any other master who had bought her after the savage custom of her people. Come! you need not fear me, I will not forget myself again."

For the moment he had been shocked out of recollection of his master and his relations to his daughter; but now his mind returned to the subject, and he asked her if she had yet seen Grayson.

She told him what had passed between them, and about her plan of remaining near him, where she could occasionally feast her eyes upon him without interfering with his purposes.

The dwarf parted with her at length, and walked on thoughtfully.

"What is this new phase?" he muttered. "Is he tiring of her? Or of what is she in the way?"

He was soon to learn!

"Are you satisfied?" he asked, morosely, a few minutes later, tossing on the table the pieces of cloth heavy with the gold-dust sewed in them.

Grayson weighed them carelessly in the palm of his hand, and as carelessly replied:

"Ah, yes, that will do very well. Cal, I thank you—you see I do not forget it—for your faithfulness!"

He smiled as he selected the word which would give the most contemptuous turn to his sarcastic acknowledgment, and watched the curl of blue smoke that issued from his lips.

His effort was not lost on the dwarf. He bowed low, hat in hand, with an irony equaling his master's most pointed satire.

"Ah! the *faithfulness* of your most abject slave! For the supreme condescension of your effulgent radiance, most humble thanks!"

"Ha! ha! ha! Cal, you are the most affable fellow that ever longed to cut the throat of the master he hated and feared at the same time. But I have a question to ask you."

"I need not say that I attend your pleasure."

"Who is this new star that has burst upon our firmament?"

"This what?"

"They call her Beauty, I believe—these cattle!—and—"

"HAH!"

"Eh! What in the name of wonder is the matter with the man?"

The dwarf had started back with a rasping ejaculation and a scowl of such black hatred as even Grayson had never witnessed before, clutching the hilt of his bowie-knife.

Ethelbert Grayson stared at him in mute wonder. What was there in so simple a question to move him so?

Recovering himself with an effort, the dwarf dropped his eyes before the curious scrutiny of the other, and growled:

"Beauty! What should I know about beauty?"

"What, indeed!" assented Grayson, in a mechanical sort of way, still intent on studying the dwarf's face.

Presently his lips began to twitch; then he smiled; and finally burst into a perfect storm of laughter.

The dwarf watched him with the restless shifting of the eyes noticeable in wild animals.

With an oath Grayson shouted:

"I believe you are in love with her!"

The shot—a random one—struck home, and the effect did not escape the lynx-eyes of the inquisitor. He had been laughing at the incongruity suggested to his mind. Now he discovered the truth of his words.

He had no spark of mercy.

He looked upon the situation as the richest joke he had ever heard of. In his amazement at such a prodigy he stopped laughing.

"By Heaven! you are in love with her!" he exclaimed.

"A lizard in love with a humming-bird you think!" hissed the dwarf, gnashing his teeth in very pain.

"Come! come! tell me all about it," said his tormentor, with his elbows on the table, prepared to listen to the most ridiculous thing, that would convulse the world with mirth. "Have you made her acquaintance? I am dying to know how she received you."

Seeing that the dwarf made no reply, he urged, brutally:

"Out with it, man! There are no secrets between you and me. Have you made her acquaintance?"

By what strange power did this man coerce the fierce nature which he evidently held so completely in his grasp? At this moment we could see that he possessed the eye of a lion-tamer. The dwarf had vainly endeavored to escape that piercing scrutiny, just as any animal would have done. In despair he replied:

"No! curse you! no!"

"Ah! worshiped at a distance? But faint heart never won fair lady. Have you made no attempt to approach her?"

Again a word spoken in jest hit the mark. Wondering what it would all come to, Grayson pressed his advantage. Once on the scent, he knew no such thing as resting short of the furthest goal. There was a fierce struggle at each point; but he conquered. He learned the whole story, the appearance of George Everett to enjoy the privilege of kicking Bradley for which the dwarf had paid, affording him no little merriment. At the end he cried:

"By Jove! Cal, you delight me in your new role of intriguer. I shall profit by your statesmanship in furthering my own designs concerning this fair lady. You must introduce me to this cat's-paw of yours—this fellow who lets himself out to be kicked for a consideration, and then doesn't see to it that the right man does the kicking. Ha! ha! ha! I have use for him. Not that I wish to amuse myself by kicking such a puppy, mind you; but I think I can turn his peculiar talents into a different channel.

Caliban stood like some hideous idol of bronze. A fierce conflict was going on in his breast. This man who had placed his foot upon his neck, who had dragged his child through a slough of iniquity, was now about to tear from him, in this unceremonious off-hand fashion the woman for whom he had conceived the one passion of his life, monstrous it might be, yet none the less deep—a passion which led him, in spite of his hatred of her through her grandfather's injury, to hope that he might approach her through her gratitude and so win, not her love, but her pity, that sentiment which he scorned coming from any one else.

What added even greater bitterness was the reflection that his child was now to be cast aside like a broken toy for this very woman. Would he endure this double wound, so vital in both its phases?"

He did!

"You forget," he said in a choking voice, "the girl has been spirited off."

Grayson laughed lightly.

"No matter," he said. "We can easily look her up. But first we must get rid of this fellow who cut in ahead of you so nicely."

Caliban looked hard at his interlocutor.

"Can he have been at hand to carry the girl off?" he muttered, his words and manner seeming to refute the suspicion of Bradley that the dwarf himself was responsible for the girl's disappearance.

"It is not plain to me," he said aloud, "why you wish to get rid of this stranger. He never saw the girl before—he said so."

"Ta! ta!" said Grayson. "I have seen him; and you know it is my habit to anticipate possible difficulties. Go and fetch this cat's-paw of yours. I will manage the rest."

Like a hound the dwarf withdrew to do his master's bidding.

CHAPTER XI.

EVERETT IN JEOPARDY.

WHEN Grayson was alone he smoked his cigar complacently, with his feet elevated upon the table.

"Brains versus muscles," he mused, with a satisfied smile. "I command; Caliban, who could rend me as a school-boy tears the wings and legs from a fly, obeys. Again, craft versus frankness. I scheme; George Everett, Esq., who can count virtues to my vices, falls. Such is life!"

He laughed cynically and raised his wine-glass between his eye and the light.

"This cowardly sneak whom Cal has picked up is a dangerous tool. A villain needs physical courage. Well, I'll use him for my purposes, and then, let him look out for himself. Only fools leave evidences of their villainy lying around loose, ready to the hand of some shrewd enemy."

During his soliloquy Grayson did not frown, nor did his cynicism find expression in a curl of the lip. He was wise enough to make his face a record of only pleasant thoughts.

When the dwarf entered with Bradley, they found an elegant gentleman, quietly enjoying his wine and cigar.

The coyote quailed a little before the first penetrating scrutiny that shot at him like a dart, but the instantly assumed complaisance of his host put him at his ease, a little wondering withal.

"Ah, Mr. Bradley," said Grayson, "I have learned of your devotion to my friend here, and having some work for a brave man, I thought I might engage you in my enterprise. I can make it worth your while, if you have the nerve to carry it through."

Bradley bowed preferring not to commit himself.

Grayson pushed a bag of gold-dust across the table toward him.

"Oblige me by testing the weight of that," he said.

Bradley lifted the bag, and his eyes sparkled avariciously.

"Do you accept?" asked the tempter.

"Yes," was the unhesitating reply.

"The business requires graceful lying, unmasking effrontery and a little wit. I may as well begin by telling you that I am a man of no scruples whatever. If it answered my purpose, I would just as leave cut your throat as to lift my hat to the lady they call Beauty. When a man has engaged in my service it don't pay him to betray me. Do you understand?"

Grayson was as smiling and suave as if he were merely passing the compliments of the season.

Bradley felt a cold streak run down his back. The dwarf was terrible, but this smiling devil thrilled him with superstitious awe.

"Now, sir," pursued Grayson, "my plan is this: the man who lies stunned in the road on the bank of the Platte must die."

"You don't expect me to murder him?"

"Oh, no—that is to say, not directly. You know the esteem in which the girl Beauty is held here, and the feeling likely to be excited among these hot-headed miners, if they thought they held a man who had been instrumental in her abduction. I depend upon you to make the mob believe that George Everett was one of the party who have carried her off, and that you succeeded in wounding him, but not in saving her. They must swing him first, and then look up the girl afterward."

"But all he's got to do is to say that I'm the man, and that he did the rescuing; and when the girl is found she'll side with him. Then where'll I be?" objected Bradley, with seeming reason.

"I've noticed that when a crowd sets out to hang a man his testimony don't go for much," said Grayson; and, as for the girl, she'll not be found until you've had ample time to cut the country."

Bradley glanced at the dwarf.

"He's got her, as I supposed," he mused. "The two are playing a deep game. Well, if I can get the money without getting my fingers burnt, I don't care for the rest of it."

Meanwhile the dwarf was watching his master narrowly, musing:

"That devil has stolen a march on me. It was his bullet that laid Everett out, and he spirited off the girl. He always played a deep game."

Having developed his plans a little more fully,

Grayson sent Bradley out to arouse the town, and, left alone with the dwarf, addressed him rapidly:

"Your robbing the stranger just at this time is another trump in our hand. Take these and put them in Everett's pockets before he is found by the mob. The excitement over the repeated robberies of late will fasten upon him, and will be enough to hang him if the other fails."

Grayson pushed across the table the pieces of cloth with gold-dust sewed in them which the dwarf had cut from the garments of the Unknown.

Without a word the dwarf took them up, and left the cabin.

Fifteen minutes later all Denver was in a flame of excitement.

Exclamations of rage burst from many a bearded lip. There was no close scrutiny into the story. Cora Preston had been abducted and one of the villains lay waiting their vengeance. That was enough for them.

When Geo. Everett awoke to consciousness he found himself being dragged along by a horde of dark-browed men who handled him with no gentle touch. Bewildered by the shock he had received by the pistol-ball ranging along his temple, he had no clear notion of what was happening to him. But had he been in full possession of his senses, and able to defend himself, his voice would have been drowned by execrations.

When he saw the dangling noose, however, he tried to make himself heard, demanding the cause of his execution. Words being useless, he struggled fiercely.

But one man cannot fight a hundred, and soon he stood bound, face to face with an ignominious death. The halter was about his neck; his executioners but waited the word of command.

Was he never to know for what he suffered death? Yes, now his accusers faced him, and demanded that he make such reparation as lay in his power by betraying his accomplices.

Everett was amazed and denied the allegation stoutly, explaining that he had just saved the girl from insult when he was stricken down.

"Show me the man who says that I was offering her violence," he concluded.

When Bradley stepped forward, Everett burst forth:

"What! he? Why, that is the cur that I kicked into the river!"

"Gents, do I look as though I had been in the river?" asked Bradley; and, having changed his clothes, he certainly bore no traces of his involuntary immersion.

This argument seemed conclusive; Everett was a stranger; the crowd once more drowned his voice by their yells.

The victim of Lynch Law looked round him in despair. In all that crowd he had not a single friend or acquaintance to whom to appeal.

At the last moment a cry rose on the outskirts of the crowd, which soon swelled into a cheer. Then the mob separated to give passage to a flying figure.

Everett looked, and his heart leaped into his throat.

CHAPTER XII.

VINDICATED.

WHEN Cora Preston awoke to consciousness she found herself lying on the open prairie. In a country bordering on the sea she would have been drenched with dew, but in that dry climate she suffered no such inconvenience from her exposure in the open night air.

Springing to her feet with no little trepidation she gazed about her.

To the westward lay the broken horizon of the mountain range. Perhaps two miles in the opposite direction she could see the twinkling lights of Denver.

"How did I get here?" she asked herself. "Some one must have carried me here while I was unconscious. But why did they leave me here? What if they should come back for me?"

With a beating heart she crouched low and sped away from the spot, glancing nervously about, fearful lest her enemy should start up from any quarter.

But even at such a moment she had a thought of pity for the man who had been stricken down at her feet. Sobbing hysterically, she murmured:

"Poor fellow! I wonder if the wretch killed him outright."

While she sped across the prairie, fleeing she knew not what enemy, the tones of his voice lingered in her ears. Not that she was in love with him, but he had been so full of vigorous life, and his fate had been so sudden and terrible.

As she crossed the bridge that spanned the river, she saw that some unusual commotion was agitating the village.

The first person she met chanced to be a miner who seemed in as great a hurry as herself.

"What is the matter, Mr. Crampton?" she asked.

"Great nuggets and pay-dirt!" cried the man

addressed, staring at her, "if here ain't Beauty herself!"

"Well, what of it?" she replied, a little annoyed at his manner.

"Why, gal, they're goin' to hang a galoot over yonder for runnin' away with ye!"

"For running away with me? Who is it?"

"Blest if I know. A stranger in these diggin's, I reckon. The feller that salted him tryin' to save you gave the alarm, and we found him layin' in the river road, creased on the temple."

Without waiting to hear more Cora sped away toward the scene of action, her springy step outstripping the heavier gait of the miner.

With a great heart thrill she recognized George Everett with his neck encircled by the fatal noose, the blood from his wound clotted in his beard, and cried at the top of her voice:

"Stop! Stop! This is a terrible mistake!"

The mob saw her, recognized her, and parted to give passage to her flying figure.

With hair flying loose in the wind, her face pale and eyes flashing with fright, she reached Everett, and placing herself before him, as if to shield him, faced the mob.

"Oh, do not do this terrible thing!" she cried.

"You have made a mistake. He saved me from insult, and was then shot down by I know not whom."

Then, grasping the arm of a man who was known to her, she continued piteously:

"Oh, take it off from his neck, please. Indeed he did nothing but protect me."

Readily enough her words were complied with.

A freeman again, Everett grasped the hand of his preserver, who was now smiling through her fast-coming tears, while she sobbed with relieved feelings.

"God bless you for your timely arrival," he said. "In another minute I would have—"

But while speaking he staggered and extended his hands blindly in the air.

With a scream Cora sprung forward and caught him in her arms; but his weight was too much for her strength, and she could only ease his fall as he sunk to the ground unconscious.

The reaction after his excitement had come, and his loss of blood told.

There was no lack of helping hands now, and two or three ran into the hotel for water, while flasks of liquor were tendered on every side. One man quietly removed the noose from the arm of the sign-board which had so nearly been converted into a gibbet—not, however, for the first time!

But in the crowd were some ghoulish natures reluctant to lose this opportunity to glut their thirst for blood. Among them arose the demand for Bradley, in the hope that he might still counteract the evidence given by Cora Preston.

But the bearer of false witness had suddenly taken flight on the appearance of one who might jeopardize his precious neck.

When this evidence of guilt became apparent the better class of citizens joined in the demand; but Bradley was nowhere to be found.

There were two dissatisfied witnesses to this turn of affairs—Grayson and the dwarf; but for prudential reasons neither took any active part in the drama being enacted.

Beneath a perfectly placid exterior, Grayson was devoured with chagrin, and indulged no little mental profanity. But he had laid a mine on which alone his hopes now hung. Would it never spring?

Elbowing his way through the crowd toward the spot where Cora bent over the unconscious Everett, he suddenly paused, a cruel glitter flashed in his eyes, and he muttered:

"At last!"

And this was the cause of his triumph. Cora's first act was to loosen George's blouse at the throat. Then, feeling a flask in the breast-pocket, she drew it forth, to administer some of the stimulant it contained.

But with the flask came something else, which slid to the ground with a thud.

"Hallo, what's that?" said one of the crowd, stooping to pick it up.

But Cora anticipated him.

It was a piece of a coat-lapel. The moment she felt its weight the girl guessed what it contained.

"I will take charge of it, and restore it to its owner when he recovers," she said, quietly.

More than one eye flashed with greed, but no one disputed her purpose. None of those rude men thought of doubting her honesty, though few of them would have trusted their fellows.

Of this event no one at the time saw the import save Grayson, and with an internal chuckle he drew away from the spot.

"No fear of these fellows forgetting that rag when the time comes," he muttered. Hah! what's that?

It was the sound of voices raised in portentous ejaculation.

Looking in the direction whence the sound proceeded Grayson discovered a body of men approaching, bearing something in their midst.

"Ha! ha!" he muttered, delightedly. "Now for a turn of the wheel that brings my fortunes

uppermost. Let us see how my beauty is impressed by her hero in the role of a highway robber."

All unconscious, Cora was watching her recovering patient with a very gentle solicitude.

CHAPTER XIII.

GRAYSON'S FIRST DEFEAT.

"GENTS," cried a loud voice, "I reckon hyer's somethin' that consarns every honest man in Denver."

The crowd turned to see an insensible man borne into their midst.

For the time Cora was too busy to notice this interruption.

"I allow," pursued the same speaker, "that this hyer kind o' thing has gone on about long enough. If we don't protect ourselves you bet nobody else won't. This hyer's the third man that has been knocked on the head an' robbed inside o' two weeks, and nobody's been brought to chalk yet."

"The gent that handled that subject had a way about him that wa'n't slow," commented a second. "See, he's cut away everything that had any pay-dirt in it."

"Hallo!" came from one who had stood near Everett when Cora pulled the flask and gold-dust from his pocket, "I allow there's some-thin' rotten not a hundred miles from this hyer neighborhood. If the galoot we've jest let off hain't got somethin' to match that coat, I'm a liar. P'raps this hyer leetle game hain't played out yet—eh, fellers?"

The dwarf and his master were delighted listeners to the babel of crimination that ensued, and a few minutes later Cora discovered that the brows of the men about her were darkened again.

Until now she had not noticed the new event which had engaged the general attention, but now a rude miner advanced and said:

"I reckon, ma'am, thar's somethin' that hain't straight about this chap. We don't want to hurt yer feelin's, but you'll have to stand aside a spell while men that'll give him a fair show find out if we hain't been a leetle hasty about takin' down that noose."

"But what's the matter?" demanded Cora showing no disposition to desert her charge, for the arbitration of even so impartial judges as those which usually form the jury of Judge Lynch's court.

"It looks powerful like as if he'd been liftin' dust that didn't grow in his claim; an' if so be you'll just hand over the bit of cloth with the dust sewed into it that jest now dropped out o' his pocket, we'll see if it don't match what's left o' the coat of a dead man we've got hyer."

"Oh, this is absurd!" cried Corra.

"You kin look fur yourself. If the cloth don't match, o' course thar hain't no harm done."

"Where's the man supposed to have been robbed."

"Right hyer."

And the next moment Cora stood beside the unconscious man, whom the dwarf had styled his master's banker.

A moment she gazed, then started, dropped upon her knees, raised the head so that the light might fall upon the gaunt face, and screamed:

"Oh, help, gentlemen! It is my father! Oh, he cannot be dead! Get a doctor, somebody! Oh, papa! papa!"

Her distress thrilled the rude auditors, and they crowded around in open-mouthed astonishment at the unexpected development.

For the moment Everett and his alleged guilt were forgotten.

"He ain't dead, miss," said one of the crowd. "It's only a pretty hard tap on the head. And hyar comes the doctor that'll fetch him round in no time."

Medical skill pronounced upon the case as not likely to be fatal, though of a very serious character.

Then vengeance again claimed the ascendancy, and eager hands searched Geo. Everett, lying almost helpless.

Evidence was not lacking, thanks to the plotting of Grayson and the execution of the dwarf.

The other pieces of cloth found on the person of Everett were brought and compared with the garments of the robbed man.

"I reckon, we don't want nothin' clearer than this," said one who believed that punishment should follow close upon the heels of crime—when he himself happened not to be implicated!

The crowd was only too ready to act under any leadership which promised summary execution; and the helpless man was again in peril of his life.

But once more Cora interfered.

Leaving her father, whose precarious condition wrung her heart, she came and stood before this other, who perhaps had already begun to have, unconsciously to either, a controlling influence over her destinies. There was a look of wonder and doubt and pain in her eyes, as she said, slowly:

"Mr. Everett, I know absolutely nothing of you, and yet I am very loth to believe possible this thing which is laid to your charge."

"Miss Preston," was the earnest reply. "I declare to you that it is false. I have never to my knowledge seen your father before; and, strange as it may appear, I know no more than do you how the gold-dust found in my pockets came to be there. It must have been put there while I lay unconscious in the road by some maliciously-disposed person."

"Have you any enemy who would thus try to throw suspicion on you?"

"I know of none. But I can explain it in no other way, unless, perhaps, some one took this means of getting rid of this evidence of his guilt."

"Bah!" sneered a miner; "nobody'd be fool enough to throw away gold-dust like that, when he could empty the dust into his pouch and chuck the bits o' cloth into the street, and nobody the wiser."

"That seems reasonable enough," admitted Everett; "but I certainly know nothing of the matter."

Cora had been watching his face while he spoke.

"I believe you," she began; but suddenly his face lighted up, and he interrupted her.

"By the way, the man who tried to abduct you may be responsible for this also. Who and where is he?"

A puzzled look flitted across Cora Preston's face.

"There is something strange about that," she said. "I did not see the man who shot you and then carried me off. I fainted with fright, and on recovery found myself out on the prairie, where I seem to have been lying for some time. Why I should have been abandoned there I do not know."

"Don't you see? Your abductor must have returned to leave these evidences of crime upon my person."

"True enough!" assented Cora, readily accepting a solution of the situation which vindicated the man whom she believed falsely accused.

But a murmur rose in the crowd. Nobody knew that it began with the dwarf, but such was the fact. Watchful of the interests of his master, though he hated him, he started the murmur of incredulity, which was picked up and echoed from every side.

Seeing that even her influence was not powerful enough to free Everett in the face of the strong popular prejudice against him, Cora compromised.

"Friends," she said, "you cannot proceed to summary measures in so doubtful a case. Let this gentleman be held for trial to-morrow, or at such a time as my father can testify, when evidence may be had exculpating him entirely."

No reasonable objection could be offered to this course, and Grayson had the chagrin of seeing his plot likely to fail after all.

Everett was taken to the "lock-up," and Mr. Preston was borne to his home, where his invalid wife, almost prostrated with apprehension at her daughter's prolonged absence, was overjoyed at the unexpected return of both her loved ones in company.

Both wife and daughter were pained by the shabbiness and emaciation of the returned husband and father; and they planned what loving care should do to effect his restoration to his former self.

But a new sorrow awaited them. When he awoke to consciousness it was plain that his reason was unseated.

The first effect of this was that he could give no evidence as to who had robbed him.

But this was found dispensable in the trial which tested Geo. Everett's guilt. By comparing the time when Mr. Preston had last been seen in a saloon, eating his bread and beer, with that at which Everett had been dropped senseless in the road, a perfect alibi was established, since George must have lain unconscious an hour before the robbery took place.

Jim Bradley was now looked upon as the author of the plot; but he had prudently withdrawn from public notice.

"Cal," said Ethelbert Grayson, pleasantly watching the curls of smoke that ascended from his lips, "we are down in the first round, but, unless I mistake, we will come to time once more. If you will produce your cat's-paw, I will proceed to the little scheme at which I hinted on first learning your ingenious mode of cultivating Miss Preston. I wish to enter the lists openly against this fellow Everett; but, of course, whatever I have a hand in must be done in an honorable and gentlemanly manner—ha! ha! ha!"

"You devil!" muttered the dwarf, behind his beard. "If you play the saint, no fear but you will win. May an undying curse rest upon my cowardly arm, that it dare not strike you as you sit!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ABDUCTION.

It was midnight when Jim Bradley crept into Ethelbert Grayson's cabin with all the skulking wariness of the coyote, to which he had been likened.

The dwarf sat in the corner, his eyes glowing

like coals, his hands mechanically clutching and tearing at each other like claws. From him Bradley turned shuddering, imagining him some ghoulish vampire, crouching and waiting for the moment when he should rend his flesh and drink his blood with those repulsive lips.

But the prospect in the other direction was far from reassuring. Ethelbert Grayson was a smiling devil.

"Well, Mr. Bradley," he said, in his smooth way, "you have disappointed your friends greatly of late. Cal and I appreciate the distinction of being alone favored with your company, when so many would be glad to take you by the hand—or throat!"

"Curse the day that I sold myself to these devils!" was the internal aspiration of the cat's-paw.

Aloud he said:

"I have you to thank for being afraid of day-light."

"Don't sulk, Bradley," laughed Grayson. "Besides, it is not strictly true that I have placed you in your present somewhat delicate situation."

"Who, then, is to blame?"

"Your avarice, my man."

Grayson's voice was silky. Only choice of the appellation "my man," hinted his displeasure at the tone Bradley had adopted.

The coyote weakened.

"Well, what's done is done. What do you want of me now?"

"I am not satisfied with the way our little scheme turned out, and I want you to assist in another hand."

"I've got about enough for me."

"You might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, you know. If you are caught as it is, you will be flayed alive. They can't do any worse than that. And there's money in this thing."

"What must I do?"

"Abduct Miss Preston."

"And get kicked into the river again?"

"Ha! ha! ha! That was something of a damper on your ardor, for a fact. But you must make better work this time. I will supply you with a horse, and when you have captured her you take her up before you and ride toward the mountains."

"And what am I to do with her? I fancy she'll be something of a white elephant."

"Not at all. I shall meet you on the plains, between here and the foothills. We exchange shots—you drop the girl and fly. As her rescuer, I take her off your hands; and you have nothing further to do in the matter."

"I reckon I'll get my head in a sling somewhere here," said Bradley, doubtfully.

"There is no necessity for it. Cal will accompany you and interfere if any one turns up at the time when you are capturing the girl. When you see me, you make a sham fight, the brisker the better, and then turn tail."

With the glint of gold-dust before his eyes and the whisky with which the dwarf had been careful to ply him bolstering up his courage, Bradley was wax in the hands of his tempter.

When he was gone Grayson turned to the dwarf and said:

"I depend upon you to draw the bullets from his weapons. The coyote may become so frightened as to lose his wits and shoot at me in earnest. I don't so much mind passing in my checks—we've all got to do that at one time or another—but I should hate to be wiped out by such a cur."

"If I could but neglect this duty, with the assurance that he would free me from your devilish tyranny by letting out your vile blood!" thought the dwarf. "Oh! for a dastardly slave, that dares not so much as lift an eyelash! When—when will my accursed heart burst its cowardly chains! Can I stand and see this ruthless devil by one act wrong beyond reparation the two beings whom alone of all the world I love?"

An icy sweat burst from his brow with the intensity of his emotions; but he stood with bowed head, mute. If he was ever to snatch courage of desperation and turn, the time was not yet.

Ethelbert Grayson, who knew his slave so well, divined his thoughts, yet regarded him with a quiet sneering smile.

"I am aware of the volcano beneath my feet," he mused. "By the time you get ready to explode, I'll put a damper on you, my pretty fellow."

Meanwhile, all unconscious of the further machinations against her, Cora Preston watched at the bedside of her beloved father with a solicitude that would scarcely permit her the necessary sleep.

The wounded man had intervals of lethargic stupor between paroxysms of delirium. When he was violent no one but Cora could soothe him, and her charm lay in her voice. The songs that he used to love best seemed to carry him back to happier days.

As for Mrs. Preston, anxiety and grief had aggravated her malady until she was an added care, rather than a help to her daughter.

A Man of Nerve.

During this time George Everett was a constant visitor, and proved himself a considerate friend. He was learning a sweet lesson. The wan smile with which Cora greeted his coming thrilled and pained him. He longed to lift at least a portion of the burden from her frail shoulders.

One day Mr. Preston had tossed in an unusually protracted period of delirium, and when on the approach of evening he sunk into a deep slumber, his daughter was well-nigh worn out.

Possessed by a nervous restlessness, she could not lie down. The balmy air seemed to woo her, and donning her hat, she went out to watch the sunset over the distant mountain crests from the river bank.

The evening breeze, laden with balsamic odors from the forests of pine, soothed her, and she wandered on and on, now stopping to pick a flower or to listen to the notes of a bird, until the sun had disappeared, leaving the sky dyed to the zenith in majestic splendor. Then she sat down, with the water rippling at her feet, and watched the deepening tints, sunk in a dreamy reverie.

The evening star glowed like a pure gem from a bed of purple velvet, when she suddenly started with a consciousness that it was growing late.

She arose to her feet with a thrill of trepidation, and turned to be confronted by a man in the act of throwing a cloak over her head.

A shrill scream leaped to her throat, but it was stifled by the heavy folds of cloth that fell about her head, and a moment later she felt herself raised in a pair of stout arms and borne rapidly along. Struggle as she might she was utterly powerless.

CHAPTER XV.

A RUTHLESS SHOT.

WORDS cannot describe the terror of Cora Preston when she found herself again in the power of her unknown enemy. On this occasion she did not faint, though the folds of the cloak that enveloped her head almost suffocated her.

Without a word she was borne perhaps forty rods, when she felt herself lifted to the back of a horse, and her captor then mounted behind her.

She felt the horse descend the river bank; then the wash of the water announced that he was fording the stream. An ascent on the other side was followed by a loping gallop across the level prairie.

Whither was she being borne? Her terrified imagination pictured a hopeless captivity among the mountain fastnesses away from help, where her friends would never know what had become of her.

For weeks past Denver had been thrown into a constantly augmenting excitement by the perpetration of repeated robberies, one of which had been accompanied by murder, by some desperado who had operated so skillfully that none of his victims had seen the hand that struck them. Had the wretch added this to his other crimes; and was she, because of her beauty, to be made the victim of this mysterious outlaw? The girl shuddered at the terrible prospect.

But in the midst of her reflections came the sound of a horse's feet falling in muffled thud on the yielding prairie loam.

Was help approaching?

By a quick effort she got her mouth to an opening in the folds of the cloak and screamed: "Help! Help! Oh—"

But her cries were smothered, as with an oath her captor again drew the cloak about her head.

Then he reined his horse in sharply.

"Hallo there! Stand, or I fire!" came a ringing challenge.

"Fire and be blowed!" returned Cora's captor and the next instant a pistol exploded almost at her ear.

She heard a horse reined back on his haunches. Then there was a return shot.

Her captor reeled in his saddle.

"My God! he has shot me!" he exclaimed.

It was true. On setting out Ethelbert Grayson had carefully loaded his revolvers, and muttered:

"A dead man tells no tales. Mr. Bradley, I intend to put you beyond the temptation to treachery. That is my way of securing myself against the indiscretion of my tools."

And now he had fired with deadly aim.

"Surrender!" he cried, and spurred his horse forward to the very side of his intended victim.

The truth suddenly burst upon Jim Bradley.

"The devil has sold me out!" he thought.

"Well, let's see if two can't play at that game!"

Grayson's face showed through the darkness not ten feet distant like a white target.

Aiming straight for it, Bradley cried:

"Die, you accursed fiend!"

He pressed the trigger. The momentary flash of his pistol lighted the face of a laughing devil.

Jim Bradley knew that his doom was sealed.

Ethelbert Grayson leaned forward in his saddle. His pistol arm shot forth. The weapon spoke.

Without a groan Jim Bradley fell from

saddle, with a bullet lodged fairly between his eyes.

While the firing was going on Cora dared not struggle, lest she should bring her body in the way of the bullets of her rescuer, but she made an effort to distract the aim of her captor by attempting to slip from his arm to the ground.

When he fell from the saddle, she was dragged backward; and though she fell upon his body, the concussion stunned her.

Her unconsciousness was but momentary, however. She was recalled by the repeated discharge of firearms.

She found herself lying on the ground, the cloak removed from her head and the night wind blowing cool on her face.

Near her stood a man firing a pistol into the air, and beside him a horse which he held by the bridle.

As she rose he heard her, turned, extended his hand with gentle courtesy, as if to support her, and said in a deep, rich voice, that fell pleasantly on her ear:

"Lady, are you uninjured? You lay in so deadly a swoon that I feared that you had received some fatal hurt."

"Oh, no, thank you. I have only been frightened and jarred by my fall. Oh!"

Her eyes fell upon a motionless figure lying at her feet, and she shrank away shuddering. Instinctively she knew that the man was dead.

"I have put him out of the way of further wickedness I fear—and hope!" said Grayson. "I heard your cry and knew that some mischief was afoot. I was obliged to kill him to save my own life. Let me introduce myself as Ethelbert Grayson, at your service. If you will mount my horse, I shall esteem it an honor to escort you back to your home; when we can send some one to take care of this wretch."

"I have to thank you for saving me from this man who was carrying me off. I am Cora Preston."

"What! Miss Preston? Is not this the second attempt to abduct you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I am glad to be the means of securing you against anything of the kind in the future. This must be the same villain. Now that he is dead you will be able to walk without fear. Could you recognize him? I will strike a match."

When the tiny blaze was held to Bradley's face Cora gave one swift glance and then turned away shuddering.

"It is the same," she said. "Let us go at once, please."

"The fool is as dead as stone," was Grayson's comment, as a result of his scrutiny of the face; and his words proved that Cora's enlightenment was not his primary motive for striking the match.

"Now, my beauty," was his mental observation, as he assisted the trembling girl to mount, "it is to be a fair fight between Mr. George Everett and Ethelbert Grayson. Let us see who wins!"

An amused smile flitted across his face, covered by the darkness, as he added:

"As for your other lover, my godlike Caliban, I fear he is out in the cold, entirely."

"Poor Cal! he's no beauty, and that's a fact. What an odd conceit that such a monster should fall in love with such a sylph. It is a Midsummer Night's Dream transposed."

CHAPTER XVI.

GRAYSON SCORES A POINT.

"HALLO, gents! Thar's trouble out yonder on the plains."

The speaker was the miner Crampton, who had told Cora of George Everett's danger in time for her to save him from the halter.

The other occupants of the saloon he had just entered, looked up, and one asked:

"What's the row, old man?"

"A scrimmage not more than a mile across the river. I saw four flashes."

"Let 'em flicker," was the careless rejoinder of one, who would have gone further to see a dog-fight than to prevent a murder.

But there were others in the room, not so hardened, and soon a little group with concerned faces stood outside the saloon door, looking into the darkness in the direction indicated by Crampton.

"There it goes again," said one, as several flashes followed each other in rapid succession.

"Somebody's gittin' hurt, sure," said another.

"Gents," said a harsh voice, in rumbling gutturals, "I reckon that ain't a fight. Them shots air too regular. Somebody's firin' off his pistol as a signal of distress—that's the way it looks to me."

All turned and saw Caliban, the dwarf, standing among them.

"I move that we go out and investigate," suggested one.

The idea met with general approval; and soon some on foot and some on horseback, half a score of men had crossed the Platte and were speeding across the intervening stretch of prairie.

They had gone little more than half the dis-

tance, when they were hailed by a voice out of the darkness.

"Hallo! Hallo! Hallo!"

They halted, responding to the challenge with a cheer, and soon dusky figures were seen approaching, which proved to be a woman on horseback and a man walking at her side.

"Who comes?" demanded George Everett.

"Miss Preston and Ethelbert Grayson who has just had the honor of rescuing her from a second attempt at abduction. And, friends, I reckon I've put an end to this sort of thing. The would-be abductor lies half a mile back—you can find him by following my trail—with two bullets through him."

"Have you killed him?"

"I'm afraid so. He gave me a pretty loud call before I dropped him. I reckon his bullet must have clipped my hair just over the ear. I was coming from Golden City when I heard Miss Preston scream. I saw there was something wrong and when I challenged him he let drive at me; but he's lying pretty still now. The lady says he is the same that tried to run away with her several days ago."

While speaking Grayson had come within the range of the lanterns carried by the other party.

What the light revealed to George Everett thrilled him with something not far removed from jealousy. He saw one who was far more of what is known as "a lady's-man" than himself in the act of taking down his arm, as if it had been about the waist of the woman who had already begun to exercise a controlling influence over the perturbations of his heart. Add to this the undeniable fact that the lady's cheek was flushed, and you have the cause of George's sudden hauteur.

The facts were that Grayson, altogether too shrewd to do so indiscreet a thing as to encircle the waist of the lady on first acquaintance, even under the pretext of supporting her in her unaccustomed seat, had only let his arm rest over the cantle of the saddle, for the purpose of misleading and awakening the jealousy of his rival; and the flush on the cheek of the unconscious Cora had been called there by pleasure at the sound of George Everett's voice.

She would have addressed him with all the familiarity that their limited acquaintance warranted, but he gave her the cue of formality by saying:

"Miss Preston, allow me to congratulate you on your escape from peril, and Mr. Grayson as the favorite of fortune, in that he was given the opportunity to risk his life so valiantly in your defense."

"Thank you for your kind wishes, Mr. Everett," said the girl, chilled by his manner. "And you only do Mr. Grayson justice; for he came to my rescue bravely indeed."

Everett bowed stiffly.

Grayson laughed with seeming good-humor and frankness.

"Between you, you overpower me," he said. "I only followed your example of the other day, Mr. Everett. It required as little courage and less skill, I fancy, to put a bullet between the fellow's eyes than to kick him into the river. Suppose we shake hands on it, and say that thus far honors are easy between us."

He extended his hand with the easy cordiality of a pleasant gentleman who felt kindly toward all the world.

George Everett flushed purple. He glanced at Cora and saw a look of surprise breaking over her face. Then setting his teeth hard, he took the proffered hand, and bowing ceremoniously, said:

"Mr. Grayson, I am happy to make your acquaintance, sir."

"Of course I reciprocate heartily, Mr. Everett," said the arch-hypocrite, with a covert sneer. "I predict a great deal of pleasure to myself in our future acquaintance."

Again George bowed stiffly.

"What a bear he is. What is the matter with him?" thought Cora, impatiently, contrasting the manners of the two gentlemen, to the disadvantage, it must be confessed, of the better man.

"The fool!" was Grayson's complacent comment. "If he thinks that women are won by sulkiness, I could give him a point or two from which he might derive profit."

As for George, he appreciated the false position in which he was placed, and it galled him.

"Confound the women!" he mused, venting his dissatisfaction with himself in objurgations against the sex, with the usual consistency of mankind, "they are taken with every popinjay; and if you try to set them right, they think you are moved to slander, by interested motives; and then a mule is divinely docile compared with one of them."

"While the others go in quest of the fellow out yonder, will you accompany Miss Preston and myself back to town?" asked Grayson, politely.

His manner, so self-possessed, exasperated George.

"Thank you," he said. "I have a fancy for a stretch across the prairie. You see the moon is just rising, and will make it pleasant riding."

Miss Preston, permit me to wish you good night, and no unpleasant effects from your adventure."

He gathered up his bridle-rein, lifted his hat, and was gone.

Miss Preston looked, as she felt, very much piqued.

As the others followed Everett, Ethelbert Grayson said in his most honeyed tones:

"I thought that the company of one with whom you have at least a slight acquaintance would be more agreeable to you than to be attended only by one who until a few moments ago was a perfect stranger to you."

"Thank you, sir," replied the girl; "but I find people agreeable in proportion to the consideration they display, rather than because of a longer or shorter period of acquaintance."

"This latter bar will be removed by time, if you will kindly permit me to prove myself worthy of your friendship," said Grayson. "And now, lest your parents should be distressed by your prolonged absence, we will lose no more time."

As they advanced Grayson mused: "The campaign opens well with dissension in the enemy's camp. Mr. Everett, look to your prize; for I am after you with a sharp stick!"

At the same time Caliban stood looking down at the fast stiffening form of the luckless cat's-paw, with clenched teeth and eyes that glowed ominously beneath his beetling brows.

"Dead men tell no tales," he muttered. "The devil is utterly remorseless. He leaves no witnesses to rise up against him. I wonder if he will serve me in this way, when he begins to fear that my poltroon heart is beginning to break the spell he has thrown over it. Oh! what a pitiful slave! what a contemptible cur! I see him rifling my heart of hearts, and dare not raise a finger!"

And he ground his teeth with fury. Would this storm ever burst upon Ethelbert Grayson unawares; or would he make provision against it? Was his triumph over George Everett a real success or only a snare by which he was to be led into the clutches of this fiend incarnate of his own making?

Let the sequel tell.

CHAPTER XVII.

A VERY CONSIDERATE GENTLEMAN.

THE loving care of his daughter Cora had wrought a great change in the personal appearance of James Preston. His unkempt beard and hair had passed under the barber's hands, and his shabby clothes had been replaced by the dress of a gentleman. He now appeared what he was, the wreck of a man of good parts.

Cora had been gone from the house perhaps half an hour when from the lethargy into which he had fallen he awoke to all appearance in a more healthy tone of mind than usual.

"Where is Cora, my dear?" he asked of his invalid wife, who sat dozing in an easy-chair.

"She went out for a walk some time ago, James," replied the lady.

"I am feeling so well I believe I will take a turn myself. I may meet her and return with her," said Mr. Preston, arising from the bed.

The invalid had not the strength to combat his will, and after a few weak expostulations she was forced to remain helpless while he dressed and went out.

As the darkness deepened without bringing the return of either husband or child the anxiety of the poor lady became distressful in the extreme. She would have called the assistance of her neighbors, but the excitement of her husband's departure had prostrated her so that she could scarcely cross the room.

So the hours dragged until on the return of Cora in company with Ethelbert Grayson her mother had sunk into a semi-unconscious state.

"Will you come in and let my parents thank you, Mr. Grayson?" the girl had asked at the door.

But he, being world-wise, had lifted his hat and said:

"Thanks, but I will not intrude upon the first moments of your parents' relieved anxiety. With your permission, I will do myself the pleasure of asking after your health to-morrow."

"Do so. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Then, with a radiant smile of greeting breaking over her face, the girl opened the door and entered, looking eagerly for her parents.

At first she thought her mother still asleep. A glance at the bed showed her that it was empty.

Springing forward with an ejaculation of dismay, she grasped her mother by the shoulder.

"Mamma! Mamma! What has happened? Where is papa?"

At the sound of her daughter's voice the lady aroused.

"Oh, my darling!" she moaned; and clung to the frightened girl, sobbing hysterically.

"What is it? What is the matter?" urged Cora; but the invalid seemed almost fainting.

The girl saw that her first attention must be given to her mother, and she set about to soothe

and quiet her, though her own heart throbbed wildly with apprehension for her father.

It was an hour before Mrs. Preston was composed enough to tell her daughter what had happened, and then the invalid clung to her hand and would not listen to her leaving her even for a moment to call assistance.

Arguments and assurances of but momentary absence were in vain. The invalid had received a severe nervous shock, and now clung to the hand of her daughter as if once released it would be lost to her forever.

She replied to the most piteous appeal with tears; and when, her heart wrung with pain and fear, Cora thought it better to let her mother suffer for a few moments while she called some one, that the search for her father might be begun, and to this end forcibly withdraw her hand, her mother screamed with terror and seemed on the point of going into convulsions.

Then the girl yielded to the hard necessity and tried to soothe the invalid to sleep, in the hope that she might then steal away. But so lightly did Mrs. Preston doze that the most cautious attempt to slip from the clasp of her hands aroused her.

Thus the break of dawn found Cora still at her painful vigil.

When it became known, Mr. Preston's disappearance from home called forth no little sympathy from the rude yet open-hearted community which held his beautiful daughter in such esteem.

Ethelbert Grayson heard the news with a glow of pleasure.

"In his state of mind he has no doubt sought his old haunts in the mountains," he mused, rubbing his hands. "With twelve hours start he will give us a good hunt. Here is the opportunity ready at my hand to win favor with the daughter by my solicitude for her parent—of course for her sake! My cue is to get in ahead of Mr. George Everett. I shall call at once."

And he did.

"Miss Preston," he said, "it's object redeems my early call from unseasonableness. I have heard of your trouble, and called at once to offer my assistance in the search for your father."

"You are too good, sir," began Cora, with feeling.

"Pray do not mention it," he interrupted. "This world would be a cold place indeed if we did not sympathize with and help each other in distress. Your father has doubtless returned to his old haunts. Can you give me any direction which will aid in tracing him?"

"No. I know nothing of his life in the mountains."

"We will have to secure competent scouts then and search every nook and corner. I beg that you will leave this all to me. Your mother will need your constant care."

"I do not know how to thank you," said Cora.

"I do not wish you to thank me," he replied. "It will be enough for me to know that I have been instrumental in relieving your pain."

The arrant knave pressed her hand with an unobtrusive gentleness that would not have startled the most coy, and spoke in a tone that any brother might have used.

Then he went to Mrs. Preston and bade her be of good cheer, adding hopeful assurances until the stricken lady wept over his hand as she might have done had he been her son.

Kneeling on the opposite side of her mother, Cora felt her heart go out to this gentle stranger in a gratitude that her artlessness made no effort to hide.

"But I must lose no more precious time," he said, rising abruptly. "I will place myself at the head of the expedition, and make arrangements to report our progress to you from time to time. When our efforts are crowned with success, I have a fleet horse, and will myself be the bearer of the glad tidings."

"And now you must not look so depressed," he added, as Cora followed him to the door, and with a glance back into the room, in a lower tone—"for your mother's sake. She needs all the encouragement you can give her by cheerful looks."

"How tenderly considerate he is," mused the girl, and looking up into his face, almost unconsciously she returned the pressure of the clasp with which he held her hand.

A quick light flashed from his eyes, and his nostrils dilated as he drew a deep breath. An instant so, in which his face expressed keen pleasure; then his eyes dropped before her cheek, he lifted his hat and turned away.

Vaguely the girl was thrilled by that look. It was enough to call a perceptible flush to her cheek.

Yet she did not consciously analyze the emotions it awoke in her own breast, nor the feeling which had prompted it in his.

Not that the most untutored simplicity could be blind to the fact that he was doing what he did for her sake. But she chose to see in it only gentlemanly courtesy, and shrinking from too close a scrutiny, gave herself up to the care of her mother.

Concurrent with her anxiety for her parents

were thoughts more exclusively pertaining to herself. As the day wore away and George Everett did not make his appearance with even so much as a word of sympathy, a feeling of pique arose in her heart, and, in a sort of mental apostrophe, she began to justify herself before him for the complacency with which she regarded Ethelbert Grayson, by upbraiding him for his unpardonable neglect.

Had George known of this phenomenon, and been versed in the workings of the feminine mind, he would have been comforted. As it was, he—poor fellow!—was utterly wretched.

He had seen the queen of his heart part with a very gallant gentleman, with a flush on her cheek and a look of pleasure in the eyes that read hers. From that parting Grayson had passed him, seeming too much engrossed in his own happy thoughts to notice him. Oh, climax of misery! he heard his rival murmur:

"Dear girl!"

How could he know that it was all a piece of diabolically clever acting—that Grayson had seen him approaching, and had worked up that little parting scene on the door-step for his especial benefit; had seen him pause at the door of the saloon and enter into conversation with one of the loungers, and understanding it all, had followed up his advantage by that tender expression dropped with such apparent unconsciousness.

George was on his way to Cora, but he could not go to her immediately after that parting. Before he dared venture into her presence he learned the significance of Grayson's visit, and knew that he had been anticipated.

"There's no use in going to her now, he muttered, feeling very much as if fate were against him. "Of course she has accepted this pretty gentleman's tender of service with thanks."

He contrasted his rough miner's dress with Grayson's gentlemanly apparel, and reflected bitterly on the likelihood of the feminine eye to be caught by mere externals. And then, as lovers always have done and always will do to the end of time, he muttered:

"If he were only worthy of her!"

And he tried to convince himself that it would be easier to give her up in the contingency imagined.

But George was too great-hearted to let his disappointment in the woman of his love affect his action prejudicial to her interests. Since he could not bring himself to join the party headed by his rival, he resolved to search for Mr. Preston on his own responsibility, and, intimating his purpose to nobody set out alone.

In view of this further misunderstanding, shall we score another point for the evil magician as opposed to the true prince?

And what of the hatred of the dwarf for James K. Preston, the son of the man to whose brutal passion he owed his deformity of body! Was this hatred and thirst for revenge the touchstone which was to test Ethelbert Grayson's strange power over the volcanic nature which he had this far held with a grasp assured almost to carelessness? Would the slave dare to default against his master?

Let us see.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HATE CONQUERS ALL.

THERE was one individual who had looked upon Mr. Preston's restoration to his family with anything but a kindly eye. When Cora knelt beside her prostrate parent and announced their relationship the dwarf was near enough to overhear her. The effect upon him was so powerful that two or three who stood near him moved away, dismayed by his black scowl and the sluffing sound of his working jaws, while his hands clutched and tore at each other in a way terrible to witness.

"Rocks! he must be the devil himself!" muttered one, not without half a belief in the truth of his words.

The dwarf overheard the remark and repaid the speaker with a black scowl of malignant hatred.

"Why cannot I mask the fiend within me?" he mused. "They must not associate my emotion with that man. When my vengeance fails—as fall it shall!—there must be no link of circumstance between the blow and the hand that deals it."

Feeling that he could not stand so near the object of his hatred without betraying himself, the dwarf withdrew from the crowd, and for long hours he walked in the darkness and solitude without the town, alone with his dark thoughts.

Now he would walk with rapid strides, as if to escape the fiend that raged within him. Anon he would crouch, like a beast about to spring upon its prey. At one moment he was ready to dance in ghoulish glee at the prospect of a speedy vengeance. The next, when he thought of the girl who had inspired him with a love which made terrible war with his long-nurtured hate, he would grovel in agony of spirit, like some wretch shut out from Paradise.

"Oh death! oh death!" was his heart-wrung cry, dying away in inarticulate moans, as

A Man of Nerve

lay with his face buried in the turf, clutching the grass with his claw-like hands, and sometimes even tearing at it with his teeth in his utter *abandon*.

Then, blazing with sudden hatred for the innocent cause of his suffering, he would hiss between his clenched teeth:

"Oh, I could tear her joint from joint! Love! She would faint with loathing at my touch; and I—I would sell my soul to have her but look upon me unshrinkingly.

"And he, the son of the accursed author of it all is within reach of my arm! Ah! ha!"

He clutched his hand in the air, as if he held his enemy by the throat. His laugh was blood-curdling.

Then his humor changed.

"Her father!"

And as his muscles relaxed and his head sunk upon his breast, tears—actual tears trickled down his shaggy beard.

Through such extremes of emotion passed the tortured heart, not altogether devilish, until the gray light of morning.

Through the days that followed, while Mr. Preston lay all unconscious under the loving care of his daughter, the dwarf bided his time, with paroxysms of fierce battle to which no eye save that of Heaven was witness.

So well did he guard his secret that even the keen eye of his master detected nothing unusual. Not till Grayson came to him with the news of Mr. Preston's disappearance did he for a single moment lose self-control. Then, in a frenzy that should have been premonitory of the terrible forces liable at any moment to burst their bounds, he clutched his master's arm with a grip that seemed likely to crush the bones, all the evil of his volcanic nature leaping forth in a rasping ejaculation:

"HAH!"

"In the fiend's name!" cried Grayson, wincing with pain; and the lightning swiftness with which a pistol appeared in his left hand, its muzzle frowning full in the dwarf's face, showed that he was ever on his guard.

Instantly the dwarf was the cringing slave; but the transition was not more rapid than Grayson's return to his wonted *nonchalance*.

"Gently, my good Cal," he cried. "And pray endeavor not to forget yourself again where there are likely to be witnesses to our little tableau."

"Of course I hold my neck ready to receive your foot," muttered the dwarf, with fierce irony.

"If you will do me the favor to look at this weapon, it will serve to account for its being drawn so hastily a moment since," said Grayson.

Caliban took in the purpose of his master, and his manner, as he examined the weapon, would have allayed all suspicion, if any had been awakened in the breasts of several spectators just far enough removed not to hear the dialogue.

A moment later Grayson had received back his pistol and advanced to the miners in question; and half an hour had scarcely elapsed before a company, some mounted, some afoot, had set out in quest of Mr. Preston.

When they reached the mountains the men separated, having first agreed upon signals when traces of the fugitive should be found.

Alone in the fastnesses bordering the Middle Park, Caliban gave the lash to his passion.

"Oh, I'll search for him!" he snarled between his grating teeth. "And when I find him—"

His fingers worked convulsively, and he glared about as if expecting to discover his victim.

Without abating his vigilance, he meditated his revenge, his horrible mouth working in its repulsive fashion until foam stood upon his lips.

And so the day waned without result, and at night the searchers camped in two parties, those having gone northward seeking one rendezvous and those to the southward the other. So it happened that, Ethelbert Grayson appearing in neither party, each thought him with the other. What had become of him we shall learn anon.

The second day was no more successful than the first, but on the third the dwarf suddenly came upon a figure crouching in the undergrowth, and dragging it forth, held in his grasp an imbecile with chattering teeth and terror-quaking frame.

"Now all the fiends of vengeance, I thank ye!" cried Caliban, with fierce exultation.

Holding his terror-stricken victim by the throat as he knelt on the ground, the dwarf drew his knife and held it aloft, as if about to plunge it into his breast, while he glared at him gloatingly.

"Mercy! Mercy!" cried Mr. Preston. "I have nothing—absolutely nothing. You may take all you can find."

"No fear but I will have all that I wish!" hissed the dwarf. "And what I wish and will have is your heart—your life—your soul!"

"Come! I do not intend to injure you," he added, with a sudden change of manner. "Follow me. But do not attempt to escape, or—"

He raised his knife menacingly, and glared with hate.

So they went, until they came to a cave in the mountain fastnesses.

"Enter!" commanded the dwarf.

His captive obeyed.

The dwarf was evidently acquainted with the place. A pine knot lighted their way.

Having gained an enlarged chamber, the dwarf selected one of the corridors leading further into the mountain, and they again followed a narrow passage, which, after numerous deviations, brought them to a second cave.

Mr. Preston looked about him apprehensively, and then regarded his captor with the helpless depreciation of a harmless lunatic.

Holding the torch above his head, the dwarf glanced from side to side as some feudal baron might have surveyed the stout walls of his donjon, as he committed to it the body of a hated rival.

"This," he said, "is to be your home and the scene of my revenge. Do you see this ill-shapen trunk?"

And the dwarf extended his arms and glanced down at his deformed body.

Mr. Preston followed the direction of his eyes helplessly.

"Why am I the miserable toad you see me?" demanded the dwarf. "You do not know that this is the work of your father—a man whom I hated with a hate only equaled by that which he bore my mother, until death took him beyond the reach of my revenge. I know nothing and care nothing of the merits of their quarrel; I only know that one day he snatched me, an infant, from that mother's breast, and dashed me to the ground, leaving the wreck you see. As he visited his wrath upon his enemy's child, so will I hurl my vengeance upon my enemy's child, and crush—crush—CRUSH you, as he crushed me!"

The fury of the dwarf culminated in his fierce threat, when his thickened articulations seemed to tear their way through his set teeth, throwing the foam in flecks from his lips, while the eyes with which he glared at his shrinking victim seemed to leap with flame.

When he left the chamber he choked up the mouth of the corridor with a large boulder, securing it in its place by a smaller wedge-shaped stone. Reaching the outer chamber, he rolled a second boulder before the entrance of the corridor, and then passed into the open air.

A strange sense of elation and defiance possessed him, and he seemed to walk more erect than was his wont. His life-long hatred had enabled him to burst at one point the mysterious bonds with which Ethelbert Grayson had trammelled him. Would this breach weaken the power of the magician in other directions?

CHAPTER XIX.

INDIAN JEALOUSY.

AND now for Ethelbert Grayson's subtlety. It is well enough in its way to have your ladylove thinking of you as in voluntary exile performing the Herculean tasks for her sake, but after all there is nothing like personal presence on the immediate scene of action.

Ethelbert Grayson determined to enjoy the advantages of both these modes of attack.

Cora Preston, then, was surprised and pained to see him approach her home the next morning on crutches, his right foot swathed in bandages and his face overspread by an interesting pallor—thanks to his knowledge of the effect of chemicals taken internally!

"Why, Mr. Grayson! what has happened? You have been hurt," exclaimed the girl, with that pretty solicitude which all young girls feel for a prepossessing sufferer of the other sex.

"Oh, it is nothing," he replied, cheerfully, sinking with seeming relief, however, into the chair which she placed for him. "I only regret it since it prevents me from further active part in the quest of your father, and denies me the pleasure of being the first to bring you the news of his recovery. I turned my ankle on a treacherous bit of ground yesterday, and shall be on the invalid list for a week or two. I don't know but it is imprudent for me to be out so soon; but I wish to relieve your anxiety with the assurance that, though I cannot direct the search in person, I have competent scouts at work who will not remit their efforts while there is anything left to be done."

The girl thanked him for his kindness, and brought cushions to ease his alleged injured ankle. Then, while she went about her household duties, he addressed himself to her mother, until by his cheerful conversation he won her mind temporarily from her sorrows.

As the girl passed to and fro she was a constant witness to his gentleness and tact. She saw that he had won her mother completely, and was doing her real good by the soothing influence of his voice and manner.

From time to time he addressed Cora on some trifling topic, as if for the pleasure of hearing her voice in reply, and she could feel that he followed her with his eyes, not obtrusively, but with a seeming unconsciousness which was a triumph in the art of flattery.

He did not stay too long; but he came again

on the following day, and took tea with his few friends in the open air on the shady side of the house.

When the dainty repast was over and the sun hung upon the horizon, he won Cora to walk with him in the long summer twilight, leaving her mother in the company of a gossipy neighbor.

As they sat on the marge of the river and watched the radiant beauties the sinking sun had left about the distant mountain-tops, they conversed in subdued tones. Wily he brought her under the charm of his society. His clear intellect and positive grasp of thought led her by the mastery of its virile strength, while the aesthetic perceptions of the artist won her by almost womanly delicacy.

We love those who give us pleasure. Would he win her by steeping her soul in the poesy of beauty, by thrilling her with the inspiration of high thoughts.

While they were watching the sunset so dreamily, a whirlwind of passion was awakening in another heart, so near that it almost seemed strange that they did not feel its influence.

From a coppice of alder bushes peered forth a dusky face. The faint blush of health on the smooth cheek had deepened to the hot glow of anger. The black eyes scintillated ominously. The quivering upper lip disclosed the white teeth but not in smiles.

"Why does the Morning Sun toy with the Lily, while his face is denied to Wa-he-ta?" muttered the Indian girl. "The Limpid Water lies dead in the shadow, when it would leap and sparkle under the light of his smile."

Long she waited and watched, until, with the gathering shadows of evening, the two arose and returned homeward. Then she glided forward and stood under the tree that had sheltered them, and shivered as if a cold wind had blown across her half-bared bosom.

"He lay here," she murmured, looking down at the crushed grass which still bore the impress of his weight.

In a sort of ecstasy of fondness, the Indian girl stretched her slight frame on the ground, nestling where he had reclined. Touching her lips to a knoll which had supported his head, she murmured:

"I love you! You were kind to the Sun, who warms me and makes me happy."

Then her manner underwent a sudden change. Stretching forth her clenched hand, she struck the spot where Cora had sat.

"I hate you!" she cried, savagely. "The Lily grew there, so that the Sun could smile upon her. Why did you not hide her behind that tree? I hate you, I say—I hate you!"

If a great Persian monarch can lash the waters for their hostility, is this simple child of nature utterly ridiculous for chiding inanimate things when her heart was sore? Nay! Who even among the enlightened ones, has not flung the hammer across the room, as some sort of satisfaction for the pain of a pounded thumb?

When the shadows of night had veiled all things in obscurity, the faithful Indian girl crept to Ethelbert Grayson's cabin and entered.

She found him, as was his custom, smoking in the dark.

"Only cowards are afraid of their own thoughts," Grayson had often said to himself, when he reflected on the popular notion that crime makes men shun the darkness and solitude.

In the moment that the girl's slight form was framed in the doorway he recognized her.

"Well, why is Wa-he-ta here?" he asked, with no shade of impatience in his voice. "Did I not tell her that I desired to be free for a season?"

"Let not the Morning Sun be clouded with anger," said the girl, with deprecating plainness. "Wa-he-ta saw that Sa-lo-wa-no was suffering. She is come to bathe his hurt with her tears and bind it with her hair."

"Strike a light," said Grayson, carelessly.

The girl complied.

Rising from the couch on which he had been lying, he stood before her.

"Where is my wound?" he asked.

Wa-he-ta glanced down at his foot.

He wore his small boot, as usual. There was no sign of any bandages.

The girl looked up in surprise.

Half smiling, he cut a pigeon-wing, as if to assure her of his soundness.

"Sa-lo-wa-no wishes to put a cloud before the eyes of his enemies?" said the girl, half inquiringly.

Accustomed to the artifices of Indian warfare, to her all deception indicated some sort of hostility; but the incongruity of viewing Cora as an enemy amused Grayson so that he laughed aloud.

In a moment, however, he became serious again, and said:

"Let the Limpid Water not question why the Morning Sun goes behind a cloud, or why he reappears. Enough, he wishes her to lie in the shadow for a while. She must not be seen looking at the Sun. Go!"

The girl looked at him wistfully, but he ex-

tinguished the light, and went and lay down on the lounge.

A moment she stood in the darkness, as if struggling with her heart. Then the door opened, and she glided out into the night.

The dwarf's hate had conquered his docility; would her love conquer hers?

CHAPTER XX.

A DOUBLE WARNING.

On the following day Grayson noticed that Cora seemed very much distressed at something. Several times she seemed on the point of speaking, and as often refrained in evident embarrassment.

Availing himself of a time when her mother was dozing, he said:

"Miss Preston, our acquaintance has been brief, but you must recognize in me one desirous of serving you in every way that a true friend can. I do not wish to force your confidence, but I cannot help seeing that you are ill at ease, and if I can aid you in any way, I hope that you will feel free to command me."

"It is because I feel that we are already trespassing too far upon your generosity," said the girl, flushing painfully. "I must tell you that papa took away with him all the gold-dust that we had, so that we have not the means to repay you your generous outlay in employing men to look for him. As much as it must pain us to give over the search, we cannot, of course, accept from a—*comparative stranger*—"

There were tears in her eyes as she looked up to see if her words had hurt him. In view of his great kindness, she had softened the appellation *stranger* by a pause and the faintest perceptible stress on the qualifying word *comparative*.

Ethelbert Grayson read her ingenuous nature like an open book. Calling all his histrionic powers to his aid, he seemed to shrink with generous sensitiveness.

"Miss Preston," he said, stammering slightly, as if with embarrassment, "I hope—you will not view my—temporary loan in the light of an obligation. I can spare it easily; and when we recover your father he can repay me. Can you let what at best is but a conventionality cut off the chance of perhaps saving his life?"

The girl was so moved by the infinite delicacy which lay more in his manner than in his words that she took his hand and let the tears fall upon it.

Very gently he said:

"If the world were not so cold and selfish, it could see that we all owe these little helps to one another in adversity. If you feel grateful to me, show it by not paining me by further reference to this subject."

What appeal could be more effective to a young, romantic girl, herself the soul of generosity?

After that their friendship flowed smoothly on, until a week had elapsed since Mr. Preston's disappearance.

One day Cora was startled by an Indian girl of about her own age, who regarded her fixedly with flashing eyes.

"Why would the Lily come between the Morning Sun and the Limpid Water?" demanded the Indian girl abruptly.

"What do you mean?" asked Cora, not a little surprised.

"I hate you!" hissed the savage.

Cora shrank away, for Wa-he-ta had laid her hand on the hilt of a hunting-knife which she carried.

"Oh, the pale-face need not fear me," said the girl. "Sa-lo-wa-no would never smile upon Wa-he-ta again if she were to stain the white breast of the Lily with blood. But I hate you!—I hate you more bitterly than the hog hates the rattlesnake."

"Why do you hate me?" asked Cora, somewhat recovering her equanimity.

"Do you not sing in the ears of Sa-lo-wa-no until he cannot hear the purl of the water where it falls over the white pebbles?"

"Sa-lo-wa-no? Who or what is Sa-lo-wa-no?"

"He is the Morning Sun," said the Indian girl, proudly. "His smile is like the yellow and red and blue on the morning sky. His breath is as sweet as the wind that sucks the dew from the prairie flowers, in June. But when he hides his face in anger the earth is all dark. No brave dares to take his scalp. Even Caliban, who boasts that he fears not the devil of the pale-face, slinks away when he points his finger."

Sorely puzzled at this bombastic rigmarole, Cora said:

"But I do not understand. Who is he? Does he live in Denver? Have I ever seen him?"

"Bah! is the white squaw a fool?" demanded Wa-he-ta, impatiently. "Does she sit in his smile every day—does she sigh because she thinks it pains him to walk on three legs—does she place the soft cushions under his foot—and then ask: Who is Sa-lo-wa-no?"

"Oh, do you mean Mr. Grayson?—the gentleman who has hurt his foot and comes to my house on crutches?"

"Yes, that is Sa-lo-wa-no."

"Well, what about him?"

"Wa-he-ta loves him, and hates you, because you woo him with your treacherous smiles. All the pale-faces sing lies—all but Sa-lo-wa-no."

Cora flushed crimson at the charge preferred against her so hotly.

"You are mistaken," she said. "I do not woo him."

"Your tongue is crooked," said the Indian girl, firmly. "Cannot Wa-he-ta see? She has skulked from bush to bush, like the coyote, watching you. Before he saw you, he was glad when Wa-he-ta made wampum in his wigwam. Now he hides his face from her. You sing and sing, and he shuts his eyes and listens so that he could not hear the thunder of a buffalo stampede. Shall I not hate you, then? I say, take care! Some day, when the blood is in her eyes and she cannot see, Wa-he-ta may cut the Lily so that she shall droop and die."

Overcome by passion, Wa-he-ta put her hands before her eyes and ran away, as if fleeing from the temptation to put her threat into immediate execution.

Not a little dismayed, and pained at the thought that Ethelbert Grayson, whom she had come to regard as a gentleman, should have been guilty of trifling with this simple child of the wilderness, Cora went home very thoughtfully.

Half an hour later George Everett felt his arm plucked from behind, and turned to see a pair of savage black eyes fixed upon his in something like impatience and contempt.

"Has the white miner the heart of a squaw?" asked Wa-he-ta, for it was she. "A cloud is over his heart. He sees that the Lily is slipping from his hand. Why does he not take her to his wigwam? Bah! he is a coyote!"

"What's the row, Wa-he-ta?" asked George, for he had some acquaintance with her.

"Go! The Open Heart must look to the Lily—Beauty, the pale-faces call her. She is singing in the ears of the Morning Sun, and winning his heart from Wa-he-ta."

"What! has Grayson been making love to you?"

"Come! come!" said the Indian girl, impatiently. "Too much talk. Go to the Lily. Don't be fool."

And she pushed him forward.

George might have smiled at her method of persuasion had not his heart ached. As it was he turned away without further words.

"I will speak to her, whatever comes of it," he muttered. "If she throws herself away on that villain, it shall not be for want of warning."

CHAPTER XXI.

ADVICE—HOW GIVEN, HOW RECEIVED.

WHEN George Everett entered her presence, Cora received him with a beating heart, yet with outward coldness. He owed some explanation of his neglect before he was received back.

Her manner struck a chill to George, and he floundered wretchedly through a lot of commonplaces, her monosyllabic replies not helping him out any.

Presently, in a fit of desperation, through which pique showed plainly, he plunged in *medias res*.

"Cora," he said, "I have been wanting to speak to you about a matter—"

And here he came to a dead stop.

"Ah?" said the girl.

"I don't know that you will listen to it kindly—most girls don't."

Another dead stop, with a lump of bitterness rising in his throat. He knew just how it was going to end.

The girl bridled and was silent. She had an instinctive foreshadowing of what was coming.

This evidence of resistance at the outset angered George, and his words were better chosen than his manner, as he said:

"Of course it is not your fault: but you are encouraging the attentions of a villain, and you ought to be warned before it is too late."

"Mr. Everett, I do not understand you!" exclaimed the girl.

It is the privilege of the sex to tell such white lies, when the fact is that Moses and all the prophets could not make the case clearer to their comprehension.

"I mean to say that Mr. Ethelbert Grayson, who has been hanging about you every day for a week, is not a fit associate for any honest woman."

Notice the conciliatory expression in which good advice is always clothed.

The reply could not be other than:

"Indeed! I have found him a very agreeable companion."

"No doubt!" snapped George, savagely.

"Following what you have just said of him, your last words are exceedingly complimentary, sir!" cried the girl, white to the lips.

"There is nothing personal in them. Their application is to womanhood in general," replied George, recanting nothing.

"I have always heard that men are to be measured by their estimate of womanhood. I am sorry I find myself so mistaken in some of my acquaintances. As for my friend, Mr.

Grayson, he has ever proved himself a refined gentleman, of association with whom any lady might be proud. I may add that he has been a friend in need, when those who made greater professions found it convenient to absent themselves."

She would not have been a woman, and resisted the temptation to slash him for his neglect. Through all her anger she wanted him to explain why he had stood aloof at such a moment.

If he had only told her then that he had spent every day of that week in search of her father, their interview might have taken a different tone; but that would have involved an explanation of his motive for not joining the others, from which his pride revolted. On the other hand, he was too much in love to wholly disguise the pain which her words caused him.

"You have no right to make such a comparison," he said. "But what can you expect from a woman, when money and knavery are on one side of the balance?"

"Against cowardice and slander in the other" supplemented the girl, and added, with increasing heat: "Why do you not bring some definite charge, so that he can make you swallow your words? What has Mr. Grayson done, that you should persecute him in this manner? Has he not a right to his money, so long as he came by it honestly?"

"Oh, certainly. And having a gentlemanly exterior is sufficient guarantee for his having come by it honestly. All gentlemen of unexceptionable broadcloth are as immaculate as their shirt fronts."

"He says that he made his money at mining, and is here looking for a good investment. Do you know of his gambling, if that is what you are hinting at?"

"Oh, no," sneered George. "But it is not necessary to have specific acts to judge of a man's character. However, I have very good reason to believe that he has been trifling, if not worse, with a beautiful Indian girl—a mere peccadillo!"

Cora started, remembering what Wa-he-ta had said; but of course she declared, roundly:

"I do not believe it!"

"Of course not," sneered George. "But, granting it were so, it is rather in his favor than otherwise."

And he laughed bitterly.

The girl flushed to the temples, drew a deep breath, as if to hurl her indignation at him in words; but suddenly whirled and swept into the house without a word.

"Well," muttered George, between his clenched teeth, "I ought to be content; my efforts have been crowned by perfect success!"

CHAPTER XXII.

ETHELBERT GRAYSON IN A DOUBLE ROLE.

AT their next meeting Grayson was quick to discover a change in Cora's manner toward him. After a little study he approached her on the subject.

"Miss Preston," he said, "pardon me if I seem abrupt; but what has come between us since yesterday?"

Cora flushed painfully, and was plainly at a loss for a reply.

"I am very sensitive to any change in the people with whom I associate," continued Grayson, looking at her wistfully; "and I cannot but feel that something has intervened since our last meeting which makes your manner more guarded. Will you be frank with me and tell me what it is?"

Cora had somewhat recovered her self-possession, yet she laughed uneasily as she said:

"Do you hope to account for a woman's whims? We are creatures of change, you know. If I have changed, as you suppose, I assure you it is because of no fault of either omission or commission on your part. Will not that satisfy you?"

"No," he said, gravely. "You are not a woman of whims. The change is one of lessened confidence in me—"

"Oh, I beg that you—"

"Excuse me. You are generous enough to give me the benefit of the doubt. But that there should be any debate must have sprung from an efficient cause."

"But if I assure you that my confidence in you is not shaken?"

"Will you as generously inform me if some one has been talking to you about me?"

"I admit that such is the case. But it would be an insult to you to seem for a moment to believe what was said, and I am sure that there is a mistake somewhere. So if you will drop the subject—"

"Is it kind to ask me to leave a calumny unrefuted? There is nothing more dangerous than to leave that which can and ought to be explained to rest upon blind faith."

Cora's position was a very delicate one. She did not wish to betray the Indian girl; nor was it the easiest of tasks to tell a gentleman friend of a week's standing that another woman had thought it necessary to come to her and assert her prior claim to him.

As she hesitated, Grayson continued with his assumed poet-like sensitiveness:

"If the sacrifice of personal feeling is too great, I prefer that you should let me remain under the imputation—"

The raising of her eyes was the signal for him to pause. He never marred the effect by adding useless words after his point was gained.

He admired the delicate changes of color in her face and her bird-like shyness as she said:

"Do you know an Indian girl named Wa-he-ta?"

He was prepared at all points. The question never phased him. His face lighted with seeming ingenuous interest, as he said:

"Oh, yes. I once saved her from a young grizzly that might have lacerated her badly, though she would probably have killed it before it had done her any fatal injury. But what of her?"

He looked puzzled.

"Are you— Oh, I cannot ask you the question!"

And Cora broke off, overwhelmed with embarrassment.

Grayson smiled indulgently, and yet as if he wondered what was coming.

Cora rallied, and with a desperate effort looked him squarely in the face and said:

"Can it be possible that you have trifled with the feelings of one so unsophisticated?"

Grayson stared at her at first as if too much surprised to speak. Then with a breaking smile of amusement, he asked:

"And 's that it?"

"Didn't I tell you it was absurd?" urged Cora, almost ready to cry with a sense of shame, and feeling not a little vexed at him for having forced her into so uncomfortable a position.

Grayson's face grew suddenly grave.

"Miss Preston," he said, "I am glad for more reasons than one that this matter has been broached between us. It is commendable to your womanly delicacy and innate purity of character that you attach so much importance to a matter which too many women would have regarded with indifference or very lenient reprobation. A squaw is just as much a woman as the finest lady in the land, and treachery to her were all the more cowardly and wicked by reason of her relative helplessness."

"No, Miss Preston, it is not possible that I have trifled with Wa-he-ta."

That settled the matter. If he had read it out of Revelations, his words would not have carried more perfect conviction.

"But I cannot imagine who has suggested such a thought to you," he added.

"When I tell you I have no right to answer that question, you will surely not urge it," said the girl.

Grayson bowed compliance; but the fact was he read her motive of delicacy like an open page.

Three hours later he had sent for Wa-he-ta by the dwarf, and received her in his cabin.

He had merely said, with assumed carelessness, between two whiffs of his cigar:

"Cal, I want to see Wa-he-ta to-night. Find her for me. By the way, if you forget to return with her, I'll not lay it up against you."

So the girl had no warning of what was coming.

When she had struck a light she scanned his face. There was only dreamy contemplativeness in it.

With the silent devotion of an animal she sat down at his feet, and resting her cheek against his knee, waited.

He spoke quietly, with no trace of resentment in his voice.

"What did Wa-he-ta say to Miss Preston since she was last here?"

A white girl, so shocked, might have leaped to her feet and stood trembling. Being an Indian, Wa-he-ta raised her head from his knee and looked into his face.

There was no start, but a dying away of the hue of health in her olive cheek; and out of her eyes looked the death of hope.

Grayson waited patiently for her reply. He never repeated a question to one whom he could command.

"I told her that she must not sing in the ears of the Morning Sun, and woo him from the Limpid Water," said the girl.

Her soul was expired with the breath that formed those words; but she did not flinch.

"Was that all?" asked Grayson, as if he were listening to a bit of idle gossip.

"I told her that Wa-he-ta might cut the Lily, so that she would droop and die, if she did not beware."

"Have you spoken to any one else of this matter?"

"The Open Heart."

"The Open Heart?"

"Everett."

"Ah!"

Mentally Grayson added:

"That accounts for his black looks. I thought as much. And he must have added his warning to Wa-he-ta's. Well, we will make provision for him."

Aloud he asked:

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him that he was a fool not to see that the Lily was slipping from his hand."

"Humph!"

Grayson smiled—mentally.

After a meditative pause he said:

"I think that I once told you that I wished no one to know that we were even so much as acquainted."

The girl looked at him with that piteous deprecation which is seen in the eye of a dog when tied to a tree to be shot. Grayson was less moved than the man who points the gun.

"And you have told two persons that I am your lover," he pursued, as if he were reciting a mathematical formula.

The girl awaited her doom in dumb despair.

"I thought I had made myself sufficiently understood," he pursued, without taking the cigar from his mouth. "It seems you do not know me yet. Let us see if you can understand this."

As he ceased speaking he raised his foot, and deliberately placing it against her breast, as she knelt before him, pushed her from him—not violently, yet firmly. A slight effort would have saved her from falling. She did not make it. With a submission which might have become an Oriental, she yielded to the pressure of his foot until she fell backward on the floor.

Dumbly she rose to her feet and stood before him.

"Go," he said, laying no stress of command on the word.

The girl was like a statue of bronze without. In her soul was the dead hush that precedes the hurricane. Silently she withdrew from the room, stopping mechanically to extinguish the light as she passed it.

By the time the door had closed at her back the storm was upon her. The tide of passion swept over her as the tornado tears through the glade, making the stout trees writhe, rending the frail flowers from their stems.

With her hands clasped in her hair at either temple, she rushed forth into the night, a rasping murmur of pain and fury issuing from her lips.

She had taken scarce a score of steps in her mad flight, when a heavy hand clutched her arm, and the voice of the dwarf hissed in her ear:

"Girl! what is the matter?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SHOT IN THE BACK.

It was a moment before Wa-he-ta was calm enough to recognize her father. Then she assailed him with a burst of fierce words.

"Is the Turtle a Dog Soldier?" she cried, likening his servility to the cowardice of the most contemptible of the western Indians. "Sa-lo-wa-no spits upon him, yet he licks his hand. Bah! he has not the heart of a squaw. His blood is water. His—"

"Hold on!" snarled the dwarf. "The biggest fighting-man on the plains or in the mountains couldn't say that and live."

"Why do you, who fear nobody else, crawl on your belly like a whipped cur before this—this half a man, who is not taller than a big squaw, whose hand is as soft and white as the hand of a white squaw?"

The dwarf shook his head gloomily and muttered:

"Medicine!"

It was the Indian word for anything mysterious or supernatural. Superstition had come to be a great element in support of Grayson's power.

Albeit an Indian, anger made the girl impatient.

"Bah! if you pinch him, will he not bleed; if you choke him, will he not die?" she demanded. "All his medicine shall not save him from my revenge. I hate him! I hate him!"

The night covered the darkening frown on the brows of the dwarf. He had expected this, knowing that Grayson's attraction to Cora boded no good to his Indian love.

"So, she has been cast off so soon!" he muttered, with a keener tinge of pain than his own wrongs had caused him.

Aloud he said:

"What has he done to you?"

The reply came like a pistol-shot:

"Spurned me with his foot!"

Caliban started violently, and clutched the hilt of his knife.

Dimly through the gloom the girl saw the action.

"Does this find your manhood? Dare you avenge me now?" she asked.

The dwarf gnashed his teeth in silence.

Wa-he-ta straightened up and tossed her hand toward him with a contemptuous gesture.

"I do not ask your hand to strike," she said.

"I am a squaw; but I have the courage to pluck out the heart of my enemy. Go! Wa-he-ta can avenge her own wrongs."

Before he could prevent her, she glided away into the night.

After this scene with his daughter the dwarf stood a long while with his head hanging on his breast, and hot tears falling from his eyes and trickling down his shaggy beard.

"Another young life blasted!" he muttered; "and still another to fall into his hands."

He tore at his neck-cloth, as if suffocating. Then with his fierce face raised to the dark heavens, he cried aloud:

"Great God, do you desert us utterly?"

A gust of wind shook a branch laden with raindrops, and dashed the water in his face. He accepted it as in some sort an answer to his invocation.

"Yes, yes," he muttered, "even nature has a grudge against some of her children."

Then he strode off through the night with clenched fists and set teeth, his deformed breast shaken by stormy sobs.

"It's easy enough to fight one enemy, or ten, or a hundred," he moaned. "But who can fight the world? Who can struggle against the will of Omnipotence as expressed in the instincts of men? When a child runs screaming with terror from my presence, shall I take its innocence to task? When my own child shrinks shuddering away from contact with my repulsive trunk, is she at fault?

"And she, she too is despised. The world would laugh her wrongs to scorn. If reprobation should reach her destroyer, it would be that he could demean himself to the level of a squaw!

"And I—oh God!—I submit! Shall I tamely bend my neck to him as a stepping stone to that other? Cora! Cora!"

He dwelt on the name with a tone in which his masterful love blended with a plea for forgiveness.

Half an hour later his passion had burned itself out, and he stood in the presence of his master, the snarling, fierce-eyed slave of old.

"Caliban, I have another job for you."

"Ah!"

"George Everett is in my way."

"Um!"

"And must be put out of it!"

"By my hand?"

"By your hand."

"How soon?"

"The sooner the better."

"Have you any preference as to method?"

"Yes."

"If I should pick a quarrel with him—"

"That won't do."

"Or if he should be mysteriously killed and robbed, like so many others during the last three months."

"No."

"Well, what do you want?"

Grayson thought a moment. Then he looked up.

"He must disappear."

"Ah!"

"As if he went away of his own accord."

"Then he is to be held alive? Something of a task."

"Did you ever know of my being guilty of such folly? Held alive indeed!"

"No, I never knew of your sparing life, unless there was something to be gained by it."

Grayson took no notice of the sarcasm.

"No one need know that he is dead. Let it be supposed that he has left Denver. No over-close inquiry after him is probable."

"Have you any idea how all this may be accomplished?—any plan to suggest?"

"For the past week he has been alone in the mountains looking for Miss Preston's father."

"Hah!" interrupted the dwarf, with a start.

Then beneath his breath he muttered:

"He is welcome to look with the rest of you!"

"He may go back again—I think he will," pursued Grayson.

"And I can follow him?"

"You can follow him. The rest I leave to you."

"To the end that he may rot in some abandoned shaft, or make food for the coyotes and buzzards."

"You divine my thoughts, Cal. You were always good at that."

"A simple rule," sneered the dwarf. "I imagine that at which hell itself would shudder, and multiply by two."

Grayson laughed.

"Your wit is equaled only by your ugliness, Cal," he said.

"By one thing else, my master."

"Eh? By what, pray?"

"By the humility with which I lick the foot that spurns me!" hissed the dwarf, with an acrid bitterness that made even his careless master regard him a moment seriously.

But a moment, however. Then Grayson shrugged his shoulders.

"We are quits there," he said. "I repay you by tolerating the kiss."

He yawned, and said:

"Good-night!"

As he turned his face to the wall the dwarf glared at him.

Perhaps thirty seconds passed, in which the dwarf never moved.

At the end of that time a slight motion on the

the room on tiptoe, until he could look into Grayson's calm face.

"My God! he is asleep!" muttered the dwarf. "He must be in league with the fiend, to dare to put himself thus in my power, after his 'aunts. My power! Pah!"

With this fierce self-abasement he turned, extinguished the light, and glided from the hut.

Once more he had been deceived. Grayson was not asleep and in his hand which was hidden beneath his body he held a cocked pistol. He knew that his power lay in that seeming audacious carelessness.

"If I am ever compelled to shoot my dear Caliban," he laughed, when alone, "who will question the story that I was defending myself against a burglar?"

Four days later, and the echoes of the Middle Park are aroused by a pistol shot.

A hideous face is thrust from a coppice, to see the effect of the treacherous shot.

Shot in the back while passing along absorbed in gloomy thought, George Everett throws up his arms with a cry, turns half-round, and falls backward to the ground.

The dwarf is about to step forth, when an answering call comes from no great distance. With a curse he shrinks back into cover, and glides noiselessly away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ETHELBERT GRAYSON'S LOVE.

CORA PRESTON believed in Ethelbert Grayson's honor. There was no question of that.

On the other hand, she believed that George Everett had been actuated by a spirit of petty jealousy, and that he had shown inexcusable ill-temper.

Notwithstanding all this, she could not help feeling rather lenient toward George and only half satisfied with Ethelbert, while she was disposed to blame herself most of all. She might have been a little less haughty and avoided the present estrangement.

Had George come back to her on that day or the next, she would doubtless have been very gracious. But when the second day passed without bringing him she began to feel piqued, and at the end of the third she snapped.

"If he wants to sulk, let him sulk!"

Upon which she indulged in a good cry.

But the next day her pride was in arms, and she treated Ethelbert Grayson with a warmth of friendship which showed that she was determined to give her other lover good cause for his jealousy.

Like most revenge, this yielded her very little satisfaction. But it had an effect altogether unlooked-for. It deluded cunning Ethelbert Grayson, who thought that he could read a woman's heart at a glance.

That night he reviewed every look and action. As each grain of evidence fell into the scale it added a new impetus to his blood. And soon he, the "cool hand" in deeds that are wont to stir other men's souls to the bottom, was pacing the floor of his cabin, his eyes flashing, his nostrils quivering, his face aglow with an emotion to which his nature had hitherto been a stranger.

"I love her! My God, how I love her. And she is mine! mine! mine!"

He repeated the word with something of savage triumph, as if he were defying fate to dispute his ownership.

In his excitement he struck his hands together, and then pressed them to his face. When he took them away he was as pale as death.

"It was a helish thought," he muttered. "No, no; I would extirpate the race before they should balk me in this!"

He sat down at the table, and bowing his face into his hands, exercised all the powers of his imagination to bring her vividly before him, that he might worship her. At last his heart of ice had burst into that flame against which no heart that the world ever knew has been proof.

All night long he tossed about on his bed, thinking those thoughts that come to us all at one time or another, building those castles whose airy minarets seem to touch heaven itself.

A strong love always renovates the heart, weeding out selfishness and placing in its stead that grand magnanimity which finds its joy in conferring happiness upon another.

In those hours, that slipped by almost unnoticed, Ethelbert Grayson made many resolves for the future, determining to live more worthily of the woman whose purity was a constant rebuke to sin. With her as a monitor ever at his side, he felt that reform would be easy.

Who has not lain awake through a long, fevered night until the first caroling of the birds soothed his perturbed thoughts and lulled him to slumber? When the sun rose Ethelbert Grayson had just sunk into a dreamless sleep, which lasted until nearly noon.

It was late in the afternoon when he sought Cora's side. He had taken more than usual pains with his toilet. He walked with a cane now.

Cora's greeting chilled him a little. He felt a change in her since the day before. He did not suspect, however, that she too had passed a wakeful night, in fierce self-conflict.

Her love and her pride had battled right royally. In Grayson's absence love had gained the upper hand. So she met him coldly on his first approach. But she fell to contrasting his chivalrous attentions with Everett's neglect, and then pride flaunted its crimson banner over defeated love.

There was no reason why she should treat one gentleman with courtesy because another was cold to her. As a sort of recompense, she swung over to the other extreme.

Blinded by the egotism of love, Grayson did not analyze her shifting moods. He only saw her gracious, and believed the gods propitious to his suit.

Cora was too much engrossed in her own wretched desperation to suspect what she was doing, until his declaration burst upon her.

"You have known me less than a fortnight, Cora," he murmured, his eyes devouring her with a look which only one emotion can give them, while his tongue framed the words with feverish rapidity; "but for twice that length of time—ever since my eyes first rested upon you—"

But here she interrupted him.

They were seated in a sort of arbor, formed by a vine trailing over a cottonwood tree. While they were conversing a murmur of voices had come from a distance on the air. Neither had noticed it until at this point a crowd of men appeared round a neighboring house advancing along the street which passed in front of Cora's home.

Some few were on horseback; but most were on foot; and all were talking excitedly, their words plentifully interlarded with rude oaths.

"Oh, Mr. Grayson! what is this?" asked Cora, glad of an excuse for interrupting him before he had put his thought into words.

Without waiting for him, she sprung up and hastened through the house to the street.

With something like an oath Grayson followed her. His love for her had engendered high thoughts, but his patience was liable to surprises by annoyance.

"What is the matter?" asked Cora, of a woman who was running by with a frightened look.

"Oh, Miss Preston," cried the woman pitifully, putting the corner of her apron to her eyes, "you knew Mr. Everett? There never was a kinder heart; and I done all his washin' ma'am."

Cora caught her breath and turned deathly pale, at mention of George's name.

"Well! well! what is it?" she cried, with her hand to her heart.

"Oh, sure, ma'am, you're not well," said the woman, with quick solicitude.

With the fury of keen pain held in suspense Cora clutched her by the shoulder, and shaking her, cried:

"Speak! speak! What has happened to Mr. Everett?"

"Oh, ma'am, don't be frightened; but they've shot him—somebody—when he was looking for your father: the men say."

Cora did not faint; but she swayed to one side so that Ethelbert Grayson instinctively extended his arm to catch her.

She flung it from her with the impatience of a tortured spirit, and then with an unfaltering step walked out into the street to intercept the advancing crowd. Already her burning eye had detected a rudely constructed litter borne by two horses walking in line.

Ethelbert Grayson too saw it and a light of cruel satisfaction came into his eyes, as he muttered:

"I forgive the interruption. The death of my only rival is joy enough for one day. If you mourn him, my pretty one, I shall be your comforter. I am willing to wait for such a prize. In the end it shall be mine!"

As for Cora, these words were ringing in her ears:

"While he was looking for your father."

CHAPTER XXV.

EVERETT IN FULL POSSESSION.

"STOP, gentlemen!"

They did stop, and fell back, making way for her to pass to the side of the litter.

She had raised her hand with a gesture of command that impressed them all strangely. Her extreme pallor, her stately step—all unaccustomed—made her seem like some young seeress.

Though those rude men did not understand what awed them, it was the dignity of the human soul when great emotions make it transcend the petty limitations of its physical habitation. Blatant grief is of the earth earthly; but the dumb lips and burning eye divorce the stricken spirit from all that is gross.

The girl stood beside the litter and looked down on the still form.

"Is he dead?" she asked, in an awe-struck whisper.

"Not yet, I reckon," answered a miner, whose gentle tone was in marked contrast with his rough appearance.

"Oh, is there hope for him? Can he recover?" asked the girl, suddenly excited.

"We're taking him to the hotel. The doctor'll prospect him and give an opinion, I reckon."

"Oh, no. He will not receive proper care at the hotel. You said he was looking for my father. My father's daughter will nurse him back to health. Bring him into the house immediately."

A murmur of approval went through the crowd. More than one thought that it was worth being wounded to have the pleasure of so sweet a nurse.

Ethelbert Grayson alone would have cut off his right hand rather than see his rival enter that house alive. His only hope was that the wound would prove fatal.

Meanwhile he put on a fair seeming, and offered to do anything in his power.

When Caliban was again in his presence, that night, Grayson said, with no manifestation of the chagrin he felt:

"Ah, you seem to have bangled the job."

"Could I know every inch of the ground in the Middle Park?" asked the dwarf. "It was from no lack of will, as the bullet in him will prove. I am glad that it is not more material to you."

"Not material to me?"

"You do not seem much put out about it."

"Did you ever see me put out about anything?"

"No, by the fiend—to whom you must be very nearly related."

"Well, I would rather be in his place now and know that he was dead, than that the affair should turn out as it has."

Grayson spoke so quietly that the dwarf starded at him.

"The devil himself!" he muttered.

Then, at Grayson's request he told how a party of searchers had been near enough to hear Everett's cry and come to his aid.

Meanwhile the excitement caused by the mysterious affair ran high. Every "hard case" in town—and there was no scarcity of them!—was regarded with suspicion; but there was not a spark of evidence to point to any one in particular.

The doctor had extracted the ball, and George Everett lay in an exhausted sleep.

"I can dress his wound; it remains with you, Miss Preston, to keep the life in him until nature can recuperate. He has lost a great deal of blood even for so strong a man," was the verdict of scientific skill.

Cora took up her mission with a fullness of the heart which promised well for the care her patient would receive.

When she was alone with him she stood looking down at him through tears of gratitude and love.

"He was searching for my father, after my treatment of him," she murmured.

Then she bent and pressed her trembling lips to his brow.

Perhaps that light touch called up pleasant dreams; for he smiled in his sleep.

As a means of support Cora returned to her needle, and this, with the care of her patients left her little time for morbid grief over the disappearance of her father, though the tears would well into her eyes when she thought of him, perhaps now dead from exposure.

Grayson had been more than kind. He had continued the search long after every one else pronounced it hopeless.

As for his suit he never followed up his interrupted declaration, though he continued his visits.

Feeling not free from compunction of conscience, Cora treated him with very gentle consideration, yet in a manner which held out no encouragement for lover-like attentions.

More and more she chafed under the sense of obligation to him.

One day he found her extremely nervous, and when he arose to go, she drew a buckskin bag from a table drawer and placed it before him. Its contents had the unmistakable clink of coins.

"Mr. Grayson," she said with no little embarrassment, "you have never told me how great an expense you incurred in the search for my father. If you will do so now, I am ready to make a more substantial return than empty thanks."

Looking into his face she saw him suddenly flush to the temples and as suddenly pale again.

With an evident effort to steady his voice, he said:

"Miss Preston, I have tried to do that which was kindest to you. Will you reciprocate, and not pain me by insisting on my accepting repayment at this time? Of course we both know that it will be easier for me to wait until some future time than for you to draw from your present scanty means of support."

He manifested such evident pain that the girl shrank from the line she had marked out for herself, but other considerations urged her forward, and she said, steadily:

"You mistake, sir. In repaying you, I am

not embarrassing myself. I thank you for your consideration."

"But in these few weeks you cannot have earned—" began Grayson.

Quick as a flash she resented this prying into her affairs. With a sudden hauteur she would not otherwise have assumed, she said:

"No, the money is not my own, but belongs to one who has the right to assume any indebtedness I may have contracted."

"My God! you have not married—"

"I have married no one, sir. If you will oblige me by stating the sum, you shall have it with interest."

The last thrust was because of outraged feeling at his persistence.

Grayson was purple in the face. In the presence of the woman he loved his marvelous self-possession failed him. He was a "cool hand" no longer.

"I do not know how much money I expended in the search," he said.

Now her eyes flashed.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"It was a free gift," he replied. "Of course I never expected to receive a cent back."

"You insult me, sir," cried Cora. "What right had you to assume that I would receive such a gift from a stranger?"

"Am I more a stranger to you than any one else west of the Mississippi? Have you given me no cause to think that you might accept this gift from me?"

"You seemed kind to me; I showed you my gratitude," said the girl, feeling that it was a somewhat lame defense.

"You did more than that. In our social intercourse there are certain conventional interpretations which we have a right to put upon the acts of others—"

"I know nothing of conventionalities, sir," interrupted Cora. "But we are not getting on. There are five hundred dollars. If they will repay you—"

While they were conversing Grayson had regained his self-control, and with it his power to plot. With his eye far into the future, he now interrupted her in turn.

"Half that sum will be nearer just," he said.

His sudden compliance surprised the girl; but she counted out the money and pushed it toward him in silence. She had the grace not to add anything by way of interest.

Grayson's fingers trembled as he gathered up the money.

"I forgive you all the pain you have perhaps unwittingly caused me," he said, and the cadences of pain in his voice thrilled the sympathetic heart of the girl. "I trust that you will do me the justice to believe that when I sought to befriend you I was not conscious of a selfish motive. Good-by!"

Impulsively she extended her hand. She could not let him leave her with hard feelings. It seemed like ingratitude.

"I owe you so much," she said, and there were tears in her eyes.

As a drowning man might clutch at assistance he caught her hand. One sweep of his arm, and he had clasped her to his breast and sobbed aloud, with his forehead touching her shoulder.

Before she found breath to expostulate, he had released her and left the room, without another word or look.

She saw him going down the street with all the elasticity lost out of his step. Then she fled to the vine arbor at the back of the house, where her mother and George Everett sat in easy-chairs, the latter looking pale and thin, but far on the road to restored health.

Sinking on the ground at his feet, she hid her face on his knee and wept bitterly.

He saw that he had conquered, but was only half satisfied with the victory. With just a touch of bitterness he said:

"Dearest, had I known it would cost you so much, I would not have insisted upon this step."

"Don't, George, don't!" she pleaded, clinging to his hand. Her heart was already too sore to bear even a shadow of reproach from him.

An unexpected bequest of money from the East had enabled George to take her indebtedness upon himself, and he had not rested until it was accomplished.

"Now," he said to himself, "there is no rival claimant. It is all plain sailing."

Was it? What of Wa-he-ta's hate, and the woes of the dwarf and his master?

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DWARF ACTS.

Of all the personages in our drama, no one suffered more keenly than Wa-he-ta. Her wild nature was stirred to its veriest depths. All unused to self-denial, she was called upon to relinquish to a rival that which was the sum of all else in life.

Like her more highly civilized sisters, she "blamed the woman," and, with their contra-

riety, loved the man all the more desperately, while she hated him, too, after a fashion, full as fiercely. But, having wounded him by the destruction of her rival, her hate would be appeased, and she would be ready to fly back to his arms.

While George Everett was illest, and Cora therefore confined to the house, Wa-he-ta had no opportunity to wreak her vengeance upon her. But as George became convalescent the lovers walked out together; and sometimes when he was asleep Cora walked alone.

At such times the girl was usually wrapped in deep meditation, and knew nothing of the dusky form that hovered near her.

One evening she wandered further than usual, and was more than usually preoccupied. George had urged upon her the propriety of a speedy marriage.

She had objected that her father was not yet found, and he had urged:

"But, dearest, if we wait for that, who knows how long our happiness may be deferred."

"George," she had said, "is there any happiness for me while dear papa may be lying unburied in some of those mountain gorges? Do you not see that mamma is pining day by day over the uncertainty of his fate? If I were only a man, I would not give up the search until I had found him, or indisputable evidences of his death."

He had colored high, taking her words as in some sort a reproach to him.

"Cora," was his reply, "my very love for you has made me indolent, it has been so sweet to linger near you. But I will accept your half-formed thought. I will renew the search, and will not claim your hand until I have set all doubts to rest."

"George, I did not mean that," she had interrupted hurriedly.

"No, dear. But your words have shown me my duty. I must go alone, because I am not rich enough to hire others; but my love will make me a host. I shall set out on Monday."

And now it was evening and he was gone, and she sat watching the distant mountains bathed in a purple haze, wondering where among them her father might be, and feeling a little doubtful of George's strength.

In marked contrast with the dreamy serenity of her meditations were the fevered thoughts of one almost as beautiful crouching near her.

Her breast the scene of a whirlwind of passion, Wa-he-ta clutched the hilt of a small dirk, and glared at her intended victim from her hiding-place in an alder bush.

"Your cheek will be whiter yet, when I let the red blood from your bosom!" she muttered. "But your voice will be dead, and your eye can no longer charm Sa-lo-wa-no. Fool! why did you not stay in the States? Neither mountain nor prairie wants the lily. One blow, and we are done with you forever!"

"Sa-lo-wa-no! Sa-lo-wa-no!" she whispered, plaintively, "it is because I love you. I would not pain you— Bah! you have no right to grieve because the lily has drooped. You are mine. I will make you smile again when she is gone."

She drew the dagger from its sheath and parted the bushes, preparatory to a spring.

At that instant a hand was laid on her shoulder, and she was drawn forcibly back.

With a muffled ejaculation, she turned and saw her father, the dwarf.

"What would the Turtle?" she demanded, fearlessly meeting his penetrating glance.

"The spirit of the Limpid Water is dark with evil thoughts. Her hands thirst for red blood. Beware! The dagger's point may turn and pierce the hand that wields it."

"Go! I have no words for the Turtle," said Wa-he-ta, haughtily.

"But I have a word or two for you," said the dwarf, dropping the Indian metaphor as unwieldy. "You must let that girl alone, or it will be the worse for you."

"The Lily offends my eye. I will cut her from the stem," said Wa-he-ta, determinedly.

"If you dare to harm her, I will kill you with my own hand!" cried the dwarf, with a sudden fury of passion. "Go fight it out with the devil to whom you gave yourself in spite of all that I could do; but keep your hands off from this innocent girl."

"The Turtle is a coward, or he would have plucked the heart out of the Morning Sun long ago. Does he ask the hand of a squaw to take revenge upon one who has spurned him and spat upon him?"

The dwarf half drew his bowie-knife.

"God knows I have been on the point of killing both you and him a hundred times," he muttered. "Come! out of my sight, or I will be tempted to forget that my blood runs in your veins."

His look was so terrible that even her fierce nature was abashed. Her purpose against Cora was no longer feasible; so turning, she fled down the road.

Though near at hand, all this had gone on so low that Cora had no warning. Still unconscious, she mused, while the dwarf took the place vacated by the Indian girl.

A great change had come over Caliban. Those weeks of torture, while such a hate as men seldom feel battled with a love which was not far removed from idolatry, had consumed his flesh, until he looked almost like a hideous mummy. But the fierce eyes, sunk so deep, showed the vital conflagration within.

At least once in forty-eight hours he had visited the object of his hate, when his soul would be torn by a storm of passion almost amounting to insanity. As often would he gloat upon the woman of his strange love, until he had quenched the fires of his hate with tears.

How long this might have continued there is no determining; but now he saw Cora threatened by Wa-he-ta's hate and Grayson's even more fatal love. Perhaps he might have endured to see her wedded to Everett, knowing that she would be happy with him, but if her life must be wrecked, there was no sufficient motive for sacrificing his love.

"I will never harm you," he whispered, after a protracted struggle. "I save you from those who are utterly ruthless."

Then he parted the bushes and moved forward.

Cora was startled from her reverie by a sob close at her side. She turned with a start, and her heart leaped into her throat. Although he had seen her almost daily, her eyes had never rested upon the dwarf since she had seen him from the window, on the first day of her arrival in Denver. Now, even more terrible than then, he was near enough to touch her.

Struck with a terror she had never before felt, she caught her breath to scream.

Like a flash the dwarf's hand closed over her mouth, and unconsciously his face assumed a fierce scowl. At the same instant, to resist her struggles, he drew her to him until her head rested against his deformed breast.

A nauseating sense of loathing overpowered the girl, and with a horrified shudder she lapsed into unconsciousness.

Tenderly the dwarf laid her down on the bank where she had been reclining. Then, kneeling beside her, he bent over her until his forehead touched the hand he held reverently in his.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HUNTED DOWN.

ALL Denver was aroused. Cora Preston had disappeared.

Following the many mysterious crimes the perpetrator of which had gone undetected, this gave rise to the wildest speculation and the fiercest rage.

One excited miner had got a new rope, and swinging it round his head, as he stood on a barrel, said:

"Rally! rally! rally! Vigilantes of Denver! Thar's to be no foolishin' in this campaign. We've stood this nonsense long enough, an' now somebody's got to swing!"

A wild yell greeted this speech. The mob gladly hailed anything that looked like "fun."

Their chaotic energy wanted only a head, which was now found in Ethelbert Grayson.

He was looking very pale. He had lost some of his wonted repose. The steady light of his eye had given place to a restless fire.

In the days that had elapsed since his parting with Cora he had been eating out his own heart. Even in the agony of that parting he had displayed magnanimity, plotting for the future when he should have swept his hated rival from his path. But the time had seemed so long and the event so uncertain that alternating hope and despair had tortured him almost into illness.

He knew of George's unexpected departure from Cora's home; and her disappearance so soon after it aroused a haunting suspicion in his mind.

"Suppose she rejected him as she rejected me," he mused; "and he, not being such a paltering coward as I, determined to have her, whether or no. I have all along assumed that she was in love with him; but now I come to think of it there is no particular reason for so doing. She may have favored some one else before she saw either of us. Her taking him into her house was an act of gratitude; and where could he have got the money with which she paid me? By Heaven! If this is only true!"

The crowd had already canvassed the significance of George's going, and its possible bearings upon Cora's disappearance. He had gone alone, and without a word of explanation to any body.

It was suggested that she had "given him the sack, in a tiff" and, repenting afterward, had followed him, to recant her words. This was scouted as soon as proposed, and the individual in whose fertile and romantic brain it originated pronounced "a doggauned lunatic!"

That they should have eloped together was equally incredible, since there was no possible motive for such a step.

"No, gentlemen," said Grayson, in his measured tones. "That Miss Preston's disappearance was involuntary I think is open to no dis-

pute. As to the man who is probably responsible for it, I make no charge. It is enough that you know how to treat him when found. I propose that we hunt him down with bloodhounds. And now let us lose no more time."

He had the eye of an avenger as he spoke. The rude men about him paid involuntary homage to his stronger spirit. With much of awe they parted to let him pass.

With a directness that impressed every one he walked to Mr. Preston's cabin.

"He's got his nose to the trail!" muttered one.

"And I'd rather have the devil after me!" asserted another.

"Look out fur these leetle cusses that wear store clo's an' don't blow none. They're greased lightin' b'iled down, jist as like as not."

"I knowed one in Sacramento city that wore kids an' patent-leathers, and carried his argufier in his weskit pocket. But, gents, he could put a pill, no bigger'n a pea, into yer left eye 'leven times out o' ten, hand-runnin'."

Such were the comments that followed Grayson.

He already had Mrs. Preston, who was almost frantic with excitement, by the hand.

"Be calm, my dear madam," he said. "We shall be more successful in this search than in the other, depend upon it. Let me have some article of Miss Preston's apparel. A shawl—anything will do."

A light shawl was got for him.

"And now, have you anything worn by Mr. Everett during his stay here?"

He compressed his lips, and his bitter hatred of the man made him paler, as he pronounced his name.

"Here are a pair of slippers which Cora made for him during his illness."

Grayson almost staggered. He shrunk from touching those evidences of her regard for his rival, with a bitter repulsion.

"Fetch one of them along," he said to a man who had followed him to the house.

As for the shawl, a trifle, scarcely more than a yard square, he tucked it into the breast of his coat, over his heart, thinking that it had encompassed her dear shoulders.

The hounds were first set upon Cora's trail, but the scent was lost on the spot where she had met the dwarf. The slipper was then held to their nose; but they could pick up no new trail.

Returning to the house, Everett's trail was started; and soon the party was coursing across the plains toward the foothills.

The gray of the morning was upon them when they entered the broken country. Hotly they pressed on over a devious course, nor stopped to break their fast, until high noon found the quarry still unstarted.

The sun already hung upon the mountain-tops when the hounds gave full tongue. The hunters of human game responded with a cheer, and pressed on with renewed energy.

Then there was a ringing report, the death-cry of one of the animals drowned in a clearer, more savage bay from the other, a second shot, then a third, and all was still.

They found him unconscious, with his fist in the throat of a dead hound that lay upon his body. A powder-scorched wound in the side of the animal showed how he had received his death. Near by lay his companion, struggling feebly to get upon his feet and moaning pitifully.

Not a trace of pity was in Ethelbert Grayson's face as he looked down at his fallen rival.

"It was your turn," he mused. "It is mine!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DWARF'S REVENGE.

THE dwarf was not unprepared for the step he had taken. Since his capture of the son of his bitter enemy, the father of the woman he loved with a tenderness so strangely at variance with his passion-distorted nature, he had resolved upon using her as an instrument for the fuller wreaking of his vengeance, at the same time that he gratified his love.

Much of the battle was between the different characters assumed by his love with his varying emotions.

When she stood before his mind in all her ethereal purity and flower-like beauty, with the winning smile that distinguished her, she seemed a thing sacred, and his love approached adoration. At such moments he could not have harmed a hair of her head. He knew that the terror and sickening horror with which anything like lover-like approaches from him must inspire her could only add to his hellish tortures, without affording him even momentary gratification.

Then the pain of the thought that she must loathe him so utterly turned his love for her into a fierce resentment that partook of the nature of jealousy, and linking her with her father, he longed to annihilate them at one swoop.

It was with this feeling strong upon him that he arose from his passionate grief over her un-

conscious form. His eyes glowed, his repulsive mouth worked with the horrible sluffing sound that indicated the climax of his fury.

As he raised her in his arms and bore her to a horse which he had hitched not far distant, he might have been taken for an ogre bearing away a nymph to his repulsive feast.

By midnight he had reached the cave where lay the victim of his hate.

He had kept Cora unconscious by means of chloroform, and now bore her through the passage in his arms, lighting his way with a torch.

"What, ho! within! Awake! awake!" he cried, in mock salutation. "I bring you a rare guest."

A faint moaning sound, as of some one aroused from slumber, was the only response.

Laying down his burden, the dwarf rolled away the stone barricade, entered the chamber and stuck the torch in a crevice in the wall.

The flickering light dimly disclosed a spectacle piteous indeed. A man reduced almost to a skeleton, his disheveled hair, matted beard and tattered clothing well in keeping, and his great, staring eyes glowed in their hollow sockets with the fires of lunacy.

"Are you back again to torture me?" he asked, crouching in his bed of mountain moss, and passing his hands one over the other with a wringing motion.

"Yes," replied the dwarf, with his accustomed fierce irony, "I am come to regale you once more with that amusing narrative—a favorite with you and me, you know."

"Stop! You know that I never injured you. I never knew of your injury until you yourself told me."

"Bah! is innocence a plea in mitigation with either man or God? Did the fiend in the story stop to think of the innocence of the babe that smiled upon him as he reached out his hand to clutch it? Does not Heaven itself visit the sins of the father unto the children?—and for what wrong of theirs?

"But I must repeat my story. You have never heard the *denouement*. There have been rare developments since I last saw you. Come! prick up your interest. I have a tableau in prospect in which you are to take a leading part."

At a loss to guess what was coming, yet dreading that which could excite his tormentor to such glee, poor Mr. Preston crouched mute, watching the dwarf as he might have watched a wild animal, which he expected at any moment to spring upon him and rend his flesh.

The dwarf began the tragic story of his wrongs, pacing the apartment with rapid strides where the narrative flowed steadily, bearing events of minor importance, but stopping before his shrinking auditor and acting with vivid dramatic effect those terrible scenes on which had hinged his destiny.

Thus he simulated the fury of the madman, as he snatched the babe from its mother's arms and dashed it to the ground. Then the mother's piercing scream rung through the cave; and stopping, the narrator seemed to pick the mangled little body from the ground, while he woke the echoes of the hollow corridor with a woman's piteous lamentations. All the endearing epithets that a mother's love could invent blended with bitter imprecations upon the monster who could so visit his rage upon helpless innocence.

Then came the life of a man whose deformity made him a butt for the unfeeling ridicule of the mob, while compassion dropped a tear while it shrunk involuntarily away, and childhood fled in open terror.

"And you dare prate to me of innocence in bar of my revenge!" he demanded, wrought to a white heat of passion. "Justice! I'll abide the justice that was meted out to me. I'll pay the debt, with interest for all these years of hell on earth. What was given by the ancestor I will requite to his heirs. He distorted my body—I will wring their hearts. Seel see! have I not a sweet revenge?"

He rushed into the corridor, and reappearing with Cora in his arms laid her at her father's feet.

"Dead! Dead!" repeated the parent in a husky whisper; and he clutched his fingers in his hair as if to steady his brain while he grasped the thought.

"No! no! Alive! alive! Do you understand all that that signifies?" cried the dwarf.

The father looked up and passed his hand across his forehead. Then, with no warning save a scream of maniac fury, he leaped at the dwarf's throat.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE REQUITAL OF HEAVEN.

THE dwarf had gloated upon the pain of the unhappy parent with the relish of a malignant ghoul, rubbing his hands and laughing with fiendish glee, and mumbling to himself:

"Ha! revenge!—ha! ha!—sweet revenge!"

When Mr. Preston sprung at his throat, Caliban struck him a blow fairly between the eyes which hurled him upon his back beside his daughter, where he lay as still as she.

The dwarf screamed with laughter as he contemplated the effect of his blow.

"But soft!" he muttered. "They must have consciousness. Fools torture the body—I would wring the soul!"

He dashed water in their faces and watched the effect.

The drug which bound Cora's senses had been dissipating for hours. She was the first to show signs of returning animation.

The dwarf withdrew into the shadow, with a feeling of awe upon him.

The girl opened her eyes, looked dreamily about, and with a start and a gasp arose to a sitting posture, her back towards her father.

Nothing but the smoking torch and the dingy walls of the cavern met her vision.

She covered and trembled.

Too much terrified to move or make an audible sound, she listened for the indication of some other living presence. All was as still as if she were in a tomb.

She looked down at her trembling hands, and then her eyes wandered over her dress.

Beside her she saw—

"OH!"

Her scream penetrated every recess of the cavern, and startled into responsive cries the thousand echoes that lurked in the dark corridors.

She had seen but the foot of a man's boot. With a bound she reached the furthest walls of the cave, and crouching there looked back.

She saw an old man in rags, stretched at length on his back, apparently dead.

She covered her face with her hands, and shudders ran through her frame in rapid succession.

Presently she was calmer and could look again; yet her blood ran cold at the thought of being in that gloomy vault alone with the dead perhaps.

The figure of the old man, lying so still exercised a strange fascination upon her. Tearfully she crept forward, until she could see the emaciated face.

A gasping start, with her hand pressed over her heart, and she took several rapid steps forward and knelt at his side. An instant later and she had his head upon her bosom and was crying:

"Papa! Papa! Oh, my darling papa!"

The first instinct was to rain tears and kisses upon his face, while she bemoaned him as one dead—dead by that awful death, starvation! The next thought was to go for assistance. There might yet be some breath of life. She hoped against hope.

In the agony of seeing him thus she never stopped to think how she had been brought to him. The memory of her meeting with the dwarf was suddenly recalled to her mind by seeing him appear before her, as she arose to seek some exit to the outer air.

He stood hat in hand, with bowed head. In his ugliness he might have been taken for the conjuration of some hashish-distempered brain of the Orient—the genius of some Arabian tale.

The girl started back, as if for the protection of her unconscious father. But the dwarf's attitude of humility reassured her. He did not offer to harm her; he, evidently, had brought her here to her father, perhaps to save him, or, at his request, to see him before he died.

He must be a friend to her parent. In that case he would help her.

"Who are you, sir?" she ventured.

"What you see—a human toad—a turtle—a monster of deformity!" replied the dwarf, with his wonted bitterness.

"And you have brought me here to my father. You are his friend?"

"I owe him a debt—a great debt!"

There was something in the biting cynicism of this man which made the girl shrink from him. She thought that he acknowledged his gratitude with a sneer.

"Oh, sir! is he dead?" was her next question.

"No. The mercy of death is denied to more than one who would hail it as a boon. I could not let him die."

She did not understand him. She thought that he made reference to his own unhappy condition and to his debt of gratitude.

"Then help me to restore him," she cried.

"Where can we get assistance?"

"None is necessary. He will recover in a moment, if you chafe his hands. You see but the effects of a shock."

His tones were cold. They filled the girl with a vague apprehension. Why did he make no attempt to revive her parent?

Mechanically she acted upon the dwarf's suggestion.

Mr. Preston revived and clasped her in his arms.

"My darling! Oh, my poor darling!" he murmured.

She saw the terror with which he looked at the dwarf, and held her as if to protect her from him.

She followed the direction of his eyes, and saw a look on the face of the dwarf that chilled her to the soul. He was gloating upon his victims with eager eyes, whose burning intensity seemed

to devour them. His hands were clutching and tearing at each other. Foam stood on his lips, and his mouth went:

"Sluff! sluff! sluff!"

"Ha! ha! ha! ha-a-a?" he laughed, in fiendish glee.

"Oh, papa!" whispered the girl, shrinking close in his arms.

"Now for the rest of my story!" cried the dwarf. "Chance threw in the way of the fiend a peri, an angel, the descendant of the man to whom he owed so great a debt of gratitude. Heaven—that rains so many blessings upon us—gave to this thing—this human lizard—the gracious boon of love for its fairest handiwork. This precious love—oh, how fit a thing to come to him!—him from whom the very stones turn with horror and disgust!—this beautiful love that suggested the means to the only revenge in aught adequate to his giant wrong.

"Ha! ha! Give her to me! Give her to me! She is my revenge, and at the same time the requital of a Heaven that metes out to us our blessings with even-handed justice. To the rich, a lazar at the gate; to the great, a sycophant's treachery; to the wise, idiotic offspring or imbecile old age; to the monster, the sylph! Give her to me, I say! She is the requital of Heaven! Ha! ha! ha!"

And clutching the father by the throat, and encircling the waist of the daughter with his arm, the dwarf fiend tore those helpless ones asunder.

CHAPTER XXX.

A DUEL.

"He's cl'ar grit," was the comment of one of the men who gathered about George Everett.

All the others seemed similarly impressed. It was a point in his favor.

"Restore him to consciousness," said Grayson, quietly, "and we may be able to make him tell us what he has done with Miss Preston."

His icy tones recalled them to the fact that the man before them must be viewed in the light of an enemy. In consequence, they handled him more roughly than they might otherwise have done.

In falling his head had come in contact with a stone. It was an ugly bump, and when he opened his eyes his senses were still wool-gathering.

"Eh? What's the matter, fellows?" he asked, rubbing his head in bewilderment.

"George Everett," said Grayson, sternly, his features twitching with emotion as he spoke, "we have tracked you to learn what you have done with Miss Preston."

The voice of his rival and Cora's name on his lips recalled George to clearer perception.

"What is Miss Preston to you?" he asked, rising to his feet.

Then, seeing the dead hound and the lowering looks of the men who surrounded him, he addressed them:

"Gentlemen, what is the meaning of this? Did those hounds come upon me accidentally, or have I been hunted down at the instigation of this—this gentleman? And if you are all in the enterprise, as your looks seem to indicate, now that you have me, what do you propose to do?"

"I reckon thar hain't no mistake about this hyer deal," muttered one, sullenly.

"Nary mistake! Hoss, you better b'lieve we know what we're up to."

"I reckon we'll peel the bark off o' you before we git through with ye!"

"Sir," said Grayson, peremptorily, "there is nothing to be gained by dissembling. We demand Miss Preston."

"And right smart too, boss."

"Trot'er out, you scalwegian, or we'll make mince-meat o' you in quick time."

Everett turned upon Grayson with flashing eyes.

"This is a very strange proceeding, Mr. Grayson," he said. "I always knew that you were a knave, but I confess I was not prepared for quite such a brigandish assault. Judging from the fellows you have in your employ, you are playing a very bold game—"

"Stow yer chin-music! Whar have you hid the gal? that's what we want to know."

"And what we're bound to know, for rocks!"

"Where have you taken Miss Preston?" persisted Grayson.

Everett stared at them blankly.

"Where have I hidden her?" he repeated.

"Why, what are you talking about?"

"Whelt the face off the beggarly hypocrite!

Bad scan to his innocent looks!"

"A taste of a rope-end will brighten his wits."

"Mr. Everett," said an honest fellow, "you might a' known that no Denver crowd would let you git away with Miss Preston. Perhaps it'll go easier with you if you give her up peaceably. But you can't fool us—"

"Bristow," said Everett, anxiously taking the man by the arm, "what does all this mean? What has happened to Miss Preston?—for I fear something is the matter. But I have not seen her since yesterday morning when I left her at her own door."

"Knock that lie back into his throat!" cried a miner standing near.

Like a flash Everett's fist shot from the shoulder, and the libelous individual "went to grass."

This act was followed by a very decided demonstration of hostilities on the part of the mob; but George placed himself with his back to a tree, and faced them with drawn pistols.

"Gentlemen," he said, "there is evidently some mistake here; and while we are trying to find out what it is we might as well treat each other courteously."

A cold chill ran through Grayson. Had he made a mistake? Was there, after all, no quarrel between the lovers, and therefore no motive for George's abducting Cora? It was a crazy and almost improbable thing, come to think of it.

"Now, Mr. Bristow," pursued George, "will you oblige me by a clear statement of why I am hunted down by hounds and a mob?"

"Last night Miss Preston disappeared from her home, and as there was something kind o' sudden and queer about your leaving the house, and this coming so soon thar was some as thought it looked as if you had spirited her off."

"And this villain is at the head of the movement!" said George, turning with flashing eyes upon Grayson.

"Gently, sir, gently!" said Grayson, with unruled self-possession. "At the proper time I shall call you to an account for those words. Just now we are to treat each other with courtesy, you know. If there is any mistake—"

"Gentlemen, there is no mistake," said George, confidently, "but a deliberate plot. If Miss Preston has disappeared from her home, depend upon it this gentleman is at the bottom of it. I am the plighted husband of the lady. I left her yesterday morning to come in search of her father, with her promise to marry me immediately upon his recovery. What motive had I to take such a senseless step as to carry her off when she was already mine?"

"On the other hand, you know of this gentleman's frequent visits at her house and their sudden discontinuance. It is fair to assume that she rejected his suit, though she never told me, and I never asked her. You see the effect upon him. He is the ghost of his former self. Doesn't he look like a desperate man? Assume that he has determined to have her, and what more natural than that he should try to secure my death by those hounds, and divert suspicion from himself by turning it upon me?"

His rapid address had its effect. The crowd looked to Grayson for a reply.

He was ready.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this counter charge is without a shadow of foundation. I know no more of Miss Preston's whereabouts than any one of you. More than one can testify that I was at the hotel from supper-time until we were informed of Miss Preston's disappearance. Then how could I have had a hand in it?"

"By proxy!" cried George, promptly.

"Money employs assassins. Will it not secure abductors? And why were you at the hotel at this particular time, unless to screen yourself more effectually from suspicion? Is it your custom to spend your evenings at the hotel? I leave the question for those who frequent the place."

"No," said one who was in the habit of spending his evenings in the hotel bar.

The crowd was visibly affected, unfavorably to Grayson.

"Mr. Ethelbert Grayson," pursued George, giving him no time to speak, "I have long known that the hostility between us could never be settled except at the mouth of the revolver. If you are not a coward, as well, as a knave, face me like a man at twenty paces."

"Nothing will please me better," said Grayson, without hesitation. "I have come prepared for this. If you please, we will fight like gentlemen, and not in the rude hit-or-miss way of this country. I have a pair of fine dueling pistols in my saddle-bags."

"As you wish," said George, feeling, however, that Grayson was trying to take an unfair advantage of him by introducing unaccustomed weapons.

Soon they were placed back to back, to turn at the word three, advance and fire whenever they chose.

George's second gave the signal:

"One!—two!—THREE!"

The combatants turned, and both advanced.

Suddenly George stopped, and his arm flew up bringing his weapon on a line with his antagonist's heart.

But Grayson was even quicker. His weapon spoke. George's was silent.

The arms of both men dropped to their sides, and they stood facing each other.

"Not a scratch!" cried one of the crowd.

"Ha! see! Everett is hit!"

It was true. George swayed unsteadily for a moment and placed his left hand over his heart.

Then he drew himself up. His eyes flashed.

His lips curled in a smile of triumph.

Deliberately he walked forward, until when he raised his pistol again, its muzzle was not a foot from Grayson's face.

Grayson never moved a muscle of face or form, but looked straight down the tube.

The mob was breathless.

"What have you done, or caused to be done, with Miss Preston?" asked George, in a clear, incisive tone.

Grayson said not a word.

George waited perhaps ten seconds, and then said:

"If you have any preparation for death, make it!"

Still Grayson never moved.

"Hold on, gents; this hyer's murder!" cried a voice.

"Not much!" was the prompt reply. "Turn and turn about. That's square. One has had his shot. Now I call:—'Neat!'"

Neither of the contestants paid any heed to this interruption.

But another came from an unexpected quarter. There was the sound of flying feet and a voice raised in an articulate cry.

Not even hearing it, in his excitement, the hard lines came into George Everett's face. Every one was confident that Grayson's time was come.

There was an evident struggle, but the vision of Cora's horrified face flitted before his imagination, and he raised his weapon and deliberately shot into the air.

Scarcely an instant later there was a flutter of loose garments, and a flying figure between the contestants, precipitated upon Ethelbert Grayson's breast the arms closing tightly about his neck.

George Everett's first sensation was as if the world had suddenly dropped from beneath his feet. The one word that thrilled through heart and brain died upon his lips—

"Cora!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

LOVE CONQUERS HATE.

CORA PRESTON did not faint. Her solicitude for her father steadied her reeling brain.

"Now for the fullness of my revenge!" cried the dwarf, thrusting her from him, and seizing upon her father.

It was the work of a moment to bind him securely. Then into a pile of fagots lying near he thrust a burning brand.

"Our nuptials shall be celebrated with bonfires, if not with ringing bells," he laughed. "A human sacrifice to propitiate the gods! We have need of it at such a monstrous wedding."

He began to drag Mr. Preston toward the fire, ere Cora divined his purpose. Then she threw herself upon her knees and clung to her parent in a desperate embrace, while she pleaded:

"Oh, spare him! spare him! Surely, he has never harmed you."

Her tearful eyes, her quivering lips, moved the dwarf. He stopped and passed his hand before his eyes, as if struggling with a mighty passion.

The girl saw the effect of her words, and urged eagerly:

"Do what you will with me, but do not, do not harm him!"

The dwarf caught at this idea.

"Do what I will with you?" repeated he, looking at her with wolfish eyes.

Cora shrunk away in shuddering horror.

"I will grant your request on one condition," said the dwarf, panting with eagerness.

The girl waited with distended eyes and shrinking form.

"That you will yield yourself up to me without resistance!"

Cora could not restrain the ejaculation of loathing with which she hid her face in her father's neck.

A cry of pain escaped the dwarf. He threw himself upon his knees and extended his clasped hands, as he pleaded:

"Oh, God! I love you! Touch but my hand, only smile upon me, and I will not raise a finger against you or yours."

In his misery he attempted to touch her hand with his lips.

With a revulsion of feeling which would not be controlled, she sprang away with a cry.

The sudden storm of fury that seized the dwarf at this found expression in his sharp ejaculation:

"HAAH!"

With one sweep of his arm he caught Mr. Preston from the ground and held him over the blazing pile.

The wretched man made no effort to save himself. The shock of the past half-hour had converted him into a weeping imbecile.

With a scream Cora realized his danger.

"I will! I will!" she cried, frantically, rushing forward.

"Swear it?" commanded the dwarf.

"Yes! yes!"

"Then he must not remain in my sight. Having him near me, I should go mad."

He tore her father from Cora's clinging hands, and rushed with him along the corridor to the outer chamber, and on to the outside world.

There he set him upon his feet and cried:

A Man of Nerve.

"Go! You are free. Let me never see you again, or I may forget my pledge."

Mr. Preston's weakened brain had lost all recollection of his daughter. The unaccustomed sunlight dazzled him. He crouched on the ground and whined piteously.

"Go! go!" hissed the dwarf, and clutching him by the arm, forced him several steps from the mouth of the cave.

The imbecile seemed gradually to realize that he was free; and when the dwarf let go his arm he sneaked off looking behind him at almost every step, to see if he was followed.

With his hands to his head the dwarf retraced his steps.

Just where he had left her he found Cora lying white and still on the ground.

He did not offer to touch her, but stood looking down upon her, until his eyes welled with tears, and great sobs shook his distorted frame.

"Great God! it cannot be!" he moaned. "I have never shown mercy to anything in the shape of man—I have had little mercy from them. But, fiend though I am, I cannot harm her."

So love waged war against itself, until the dwarf fled from the sight that crazed him.

Out among the *debris* of a convulsed world, fit emblem of the mighty strife waging in his breast, he wandered, while in his gloomy abode lay the fair girl who had roused those giant passions to battle.

How long she lay she knew not; but finally youthful vitality asserted itself, and she awoke.

With tottering limbs she sought for some avenue of escape, but found herself securely imprisoned.

In that awful solitude she felt as if she must go distracted, when suddenly she heard a step in the corridor, a light appeared through the chinks around the boulder which obstructed the opening, and some one was evidently at work removing it.

Cora crouched against the furthest wall and waited. It was the most terrible moment of her life.

CHAPTER XXXII.

INDIAN GRATITUDE vs. INDIAN HATE.

WHEN the boulder rolled back, Cora experienced a sense of relief that amounted to faintness. Instead of the hideous dwarf, his beautiful daughter stood revealed.

With a cry of delight, Cora sprung forward.

"Oh, Wa-he-ta! I am so glad you have come to assist—"

"Back!" commanded the Indian girl, and thrust her torch, almost into Cora's face.

The latter started back in dismay.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Will you not help me to get out of this terrible place?"

"The Lily goes not out alive!" said Wa-he-ta, sternly.

"What is the matter? Why do you wish to detain me?"

"Wa-he-ta is not a fool, that she should not know why the Lily is here."

"But I was brought here against my will, by a hideous dwarf."

"You are here because the Morning Sun will set it. But when he comes to find you, he will see that Wa-he-ta knew how to be avenged."

As she spoke, the Indian girl threw her torch aside and drew her dagger.

"Come!" she said, "the Lily must die."

"Stand out of my path!" commanded Cora, imperiously.

She was pale to the lips. But now it was only woman against woman, and she did not purpose to yield up her life to the savage jealousy of this Indian girl without a struggle.

Wa-he-ta smiled scornfully. What opposition could this white squaw make to her lithe activity, trained in the open mountain air?

"The Lily is in *my* path," she said, fiercely. "My hand shall stain her white breast with red blood."

She advanced to put her threat into execution.

Cora sprung for the torch which the Indian girl had thrown aside, to use it as a means of defense.

Like a cat Wa-he-ta was upon her, and held her by the throat as she lay on the ground.

Cora saw the gleam of the uplifted knife, and felt that she was powerless to avert her fate.

At the critical moment, when she had nerv'd her arm for the blow, Wa-he-ta started. Her eye had fallen upon an oddly shaped shell attached to a ribbon, which had slipped from Cora's bosom.

"What is this?" she asked, releasing the girl's throat and taking the shell in her hand. "Where did the Lily get the medicine shell?"

Cora was surprised at the sudden interest betrayed by the Indian girl. Her questions recalled to mind the words of her father when he put it about her neck.

"Always wear it, my pet. If you are ever exposed to danger from the Indians, it may save your life and procure your restoration to liberty."

To the Indian girl she replied:

"My father gave it to me. It was a present

to him from a chief whose granddaughter's life he saved."

Wa-he-ta arose and began to pace the cave. Her features worked spasmodically. She was evidently going through a fierce struggle.

Cora waited, wondering at the power exercised over the girl by the shell.

Presently Wa-he-ta came and stood before her, with eyes on the ground.

"Your father saved Wa-he-ta's life," she said; "her hand cannot take your life."

"And you will save me?" cried Cora, springing forward to take Wa-he-ta's hand.

"Do not touch me!" cried the Indian girl, fiercely, springing back, to avoid contact with one whom she hated none the less because she owed her a debt of gratitude.

"At least you will not prevent my escape from this place?"

"Promise me that you will never again sing in the ears of Sa-lo-wa-no."

"But, Wa-he-ta, I never tried to win him from you," urged Cora, and then flushed at the thought that perhaps all her acts had hardly been in keeping with her avowal.

"Promise!" repeated Wa-he-ta, with an impatient frown.

She was plainly not disposed to argue the matter.

"I promise, then," said Cora.

Without a further word the Indian girl turned to leave the cave, having first rekindled the torch with which she had entered it.

Gladly Cora followed her.

Once more she saw the glad light of heaven and inhaled the balsam-laden breeze!

She was about to thank her deliverer, when she saw Wa-he-ta suddenly start, with a low ejaculation.

The Indian girl crouched down and glided away so suddenly that she seemed almost to have sunk into the ground.

While Cora stood in wonder, she heard a low chuckle behind her, and before she could turn a hand was laid on her wrist.

"So my pretty bird, you have found your way out of your cage. I thought I had housed you securely."

Cora turned sick. She was again a prisoner in the hands of the dwarf. He had come just in time to intercept her flight.

Wa-he-ta's quick ear had detected the snapping of a twig which warned her of the approach of some one; and she had slipped away without detection.

The dwarf supposed that in his excitement he had left the boulder insecure, and that Cora had forced it back unaided.

"If you will precede me you will obviate the necessity of my carrying you," he said.

And nothing but this thought enabled her to totter back into the cave, where she sunk to the ground in abject despair.

Wa-he-ta had followed the dwarf and his captive, running at the top of her speed across the prairie to keep up with his horse. Only Indian endurance, stimulated by a pertinacious purpose of revenge, could have enabled her to perform thefeat she accomplished that night.

But the edge of Indian hate had been turned by Indian gratitude. It had saved Cora's life. Would it cause Wa-he-ta to take one step more? Would she betray Cora's place of confinement and secure her release?

Her jealousy might supply another motive, since she had fallen into the mistake that Cora was held captive by Grayson's orders.

As for betraying her father to the fury of the mob, his coming between her and her revenge and threatening her life had aroused active hostility between them, even if she had ever felt any affection for the ill-shaped being who had been to her a father in little else than in name.

So let the battle of these wild natures go on. Perhaps they will work out the good of those most deserving.

The dwarf had been in the cave but a moment when he started and stared at the floor with a sharp ejaculation.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHO WINS?

We have said that George Everett sustained a great shock at the interruption of the duel. It was because his mind was so engrossed with Cora, that at the first glance he only realized that it was a female figure precipitated upon the breast of his antagonist, and jumped to the conclusion that it was Cora interposing her body to save Grayson.

The next second he almost smiled at his mistake, when he saw Grayson nearly thrown from his feet by the impetus of Wa-he-ta's body.

Still clinging to Grayson, the Indian girl turned upon his opponent with flashing eyes.

"Stop!" she cried. "Why would you shoot Sa-lo-wa-no? He knows no more of the Lily than do you."

"Wa-he-ta," said Everett, eagerly, "what do you know of Miss Preston? Has she been carried off against her will?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Not by Sa-lo-wa-no."

"But by his wish?"

"No."

Wa-he-ta lied without hesitation. She believed that Grayson had procured Cora's abduction.

"By whom, then?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Cannot tell? And why, pray?"

"Enough, she is safe. I can tell you more."

"And do you think that I will be satisfied by the simple assurance that she is safe?"

Wa-he-ta drew herself up proudly.

"And what will you do about it?" she asked.

"Compel you to tell me where she is."

The Indian girl's lip curled.

"By holding you and this gentleman, with whom you seem to be so intimate, as security," concluded Everett.

Grayson had been as much surprised as any one else at the unexpected appearance of Wa-he-ta. Notwithstanding her evident purpose to save his life, even at the expense of her own, if necessary, he was not at all pleased at her lover-like way of doing it, before such a crowd, and especially before Cora's lover. His first act was to repulse her, assuming a look of surprise as if she had been a stranger to him.

Stung to the heart, the girl never wavered in her devotion. At the threat of holding him, she changed her manner.

"Go home," she said. "You will find the Lily there before you."

"And how about her abductor?" persisted George.

He had little inclination to submit to such an outrage quietly.

"Be satisfied that you get her back," said the Indian girl. "It was my hand that released her. Ask no more of me."

"That's square," cried a voice whose possessor had little sympathy with George Everett.

Many other honest fellows believed Wa-he-ta, and since she had restored the girl, they thought it nothing more than fair that, if she had personal reasons for wishing to screen the abductor, she had earned the right to indulge.

In haughty silence Grayson was about to turn away, when George Everett's voice interposed.

"Wait," he said. "When we have seen Miss Preston, if she exonerates you, you are free."

"Gentlemen," said Grayson, addressing the mob, "I confess that matters seem to me to have taken a strange turn. I came out with you to help rescue the lady, and I find myself held to account for her by the very man whom we all suspected. Granted that we were mistaken, I do not see how that implicates me. No, Mr. Everett, I do not recognize your authority to hold me a prisoner. If you think you can do it by individual force of arms, you are welcome to try."

"Enough's enough!" yelled a voice. "I reckon we've got evidence that clears Mr. Grayson. I go my pile on fair play all round, and I kin back it with lead and steel."

"Gentlemen, I leave it to you," said Everett. "How many are in favor of letting this gentleman go?"

The majority was decided, and Everett bowed compliance.

Turning to address Wa-he-ta, he discovered that she had slipped away.

Not feeling very well satisfied, he set out for home.

But before they got out of the mountain country, they found what they had so long looked for in vain—Mr. Preston.

Meanwhile Ethelbert Grayson had set out by himself, and fortune had turned his steps so that he came upon Wa-he-ta, crouching on the ground and weeping.

At the sound of his footstep she arose and stood before him with bound head. Her heavy bosom showed that she could not altogether conquer her emotion.

"Wa-he-ta," he asked, "who stole Miss Preston from her home?"

The Indian girl's eyes flashed upon him indignantly.

"Wa-he-ta's tongue was crooked to save Sa-lo-wa-no's life, because she loved him better than she loved the truth," she said, haughtily; "but do not mock her now."

"But I did not abduct the girl. If you have seen her, you must know that."

"No, but Sa-lo-wa-no's will works through other hands," said Wa-he-ta, sadly.

"I tell you I know nothing about her abduction or her abductor. Who is he?"

The girl started.

"Did not Sa-lo-wa-no order the Turtle to steal away the Lily?"

"No."

"Is Sa-lo-wa-no's tongue straight?"

"I swear to it, Wa-he-ta."

"Then why did the Turtle take her from her home?"

"By Heaven! I have it," cried Grayson, and burst into an immoderate fit of laughter.

Wa-he-ta looked puzzled.

"The Turtle was in love with the Lily. And the infernal rascal has proved treacherous to me to accomplish his own purposes. Love has conquered fear."

Wa-he-ta looked incredulous.

"The toad does not mate with the flower," she said.

"Not as a general thing; but in this case he has attempted it."

"And it was not Sa-lo-wa-no's will?"

"Once more, no."

The girl's heart began to swell. Might he still love her?

"Where is Miss Preston? Did you really free her from Caliban?" asked Grayson.

"No," said the girl. "But I could see no other way to save your life, than by telling Everett that she was at home."

"Do you know where she is? Take me to her!"

The girl looked at him suspiciously.

"Oh, you need not be afraid that I care for her," said Grayson. "She has told me that she prefers another, and I wish him luck of her."

Grayson only laughed.

"And you will not forget Wa-he-ta, when the pale-face squaw sings in your ears?"

"Oh, no. Lead me to her at once."

The girl complied.

The dwarf had detected traces of Wa-he-ta's presence on the floor of the cavern. Questioning Cora was needless. He understood her escape from the cave.

His first step was to go out of the cave and reconnoiter the vicinity of its mouth. He was determined to remove Cora from the cave, and he did not wish to be again tracked.

But Wa-he-ta had heard the hounds and their death-shots at no great distance, and gone to learn their significance, in time to interfere in the duel.

Returning to the cave, the dwarf was making his way with Cora again toward the outer world, when at the mouth of the cave he came face to face with his master.

Both stopped and looked at each other. It was a critical moment. Would the invisible power of the master be adequate to make the slave yield at the very moment of triumphant revolt? Could he snatch the meat from beneath the lion's paw?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WORM TURNS.

Of course Cora knew nothing of the relations between the dwarf and his master. Out of gratitude Wa-he-ta had undertaken to rescue her, and failed. Now she appeared again, accompanied by a man—as Cora supposed, assistance competent to cope with the dwarf.

Seeing in Ethelbert a rescuer and an old friend whom she had never ceased to esteem, though she could not love him, she sprung toward him with a cry, extending her hands, as was natural.

"Oh, Mr. Grayson!" was all that she said.

It was natural that she should shrink to his side; and when he put his arm about her she thought only of his extended protection. Grayson, too, saw and understood. It was something to him, loving her as he did, to feel her clinging to him, though he could not cheat himself into a misinterpretation of her feelings.

But there were two others who only saw a beautiful woman spring into the arms extended to receive her.

Wa-he-ta gasped, and clutching her dagger, seemed about to plunge it into her rival.

The dwarf put his hand before his eyes and staggered back. In that moment a thought of bitterness took precedence of even anger, at being thwarted.

"How she leaps to the embrace of this young Apollo!" he mused. "The fiend's curse upon the hand that robbed me of the semblance of man!"

Meanwhile a sudden change had come over Grayson. A thought flashed through his mind that blanched his face to the lips. A deadly faintness seized him as the blood crowded upon his heart: then a great wave throbbed through every vein, and his eyes flashed.

The thought was:

"I have her away from all the world. Why give her back?"

His words showed that his purpose was fixed in an instant.

"Thank you, Caliban," he said. "You have anticipated my wishes. Let us return to the cave."

It was the "cool hand" again. As he advanced with an assured step, the dwarf yielded from force of habit.

The critical moment was past. The master had won once more.

Cora's surprise was unbounded.

"Do you know this terrible creature?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," replied Grayson, lightly. "There is nothing very terrible about him, I assure you."

A fearful, undefined apprehension seized the girl. Mechanically, and with her thoughts busy trying to learn why she felt so benumbed, she asked:

"Who is he?"

"My servant."

Grayson spoke as though it were a matter of course.

There was a dead silence, while the girl's blood seemed distilled through her veins in beads of ice.

"And you are the brain of this wicked plot?" she asked, presently.

"Oh, no. It was not of my contriving, I assure you, or I should not have staid from your side so long. When you disappeared, no one was more surprised or pained than I. If I mistake not, I am reaping Caliban's harvest. It is not the first time—eh, Cal?"

"No, it is not the first time," said the dwarf, in a way that would have made most men nervous. Grayson only laughed.

"And may I know your purpose with reference to myself?" asked Cora.

Her great peril—she dreaded Grayson, even more than the dwarf, if possible—gave her coolness.

"All is said in the words—I *love you!*" replied Grayson.

His manner left nothing for further inquiry.

"Fetch us wine, Cal, if you have such a thing as a cellar in this hole in the hill," said Grayson, as though he were in his own house.

From a niche in the wall Caliban procured food which he had prepared for his own sustenance and Cora's, and wine, too, of the best procurable in Denver, and placed them on a flat stone.

"Come, let's have no long faces," said Grayson. "Eat, drink, and be merry. Sit you on my right hand, Miss Cora. You, Miss Wa-he-ta, on my left. Cal, put your handsome presence where I can see it constantly before me, by looking across the table."

A nervous *abandon* was taking possession of him. Cora saw in him a man given over to desperation. The others knew not what to make of this strange mood.

Wa-he-ta came from the corner where she had been crouching, and took the place assigned her. Her eyes wandered from Grayson to Cora and back again. She looked as if she had been struck dumb.

The dwarf slunk to his place with his eyes on the ground.

Cora yielded compliance to the whim of her captor because she feared to precipitate his anger.

It was a strange feast. Each ate and drank by direction, save that Grayson was his own master, and drank as if he were trying to quench the fire that had seized upon heart and brain.

Wildly his laugh rung forth at the ridiculous spectacle presented by his reluctant guests.

"Drink! drink! my Apollo, to the health of my young bride!" he cried.

And the dwarf drank, as if the wine were liquid fire, never raising his eyes, and choking at every swallow.

To make the draught more fiery, Grayson mixed the liquors, and drained glass after glass.

Cora thought herself in the presence of a maniac. She drank because she dared not refuse. Her only hope was that excitement would prevent the unaccustomed poison from gaining the mastery over her senses, or that Grayson would yield to stupor before she had succumbed.

But suddenly Grayson's mania took a turn that filled her with horror.

"Look at them, my love!" he cried, bursting with laughter. "Aren't they a gentle pair? Cal there loves you and hates me, while the eyes of the fair Wa-he-ta show that it is a debatable question which would afford her greater satisfaction, to embrace me or strangle you. Let us have rare sport. They shall witness our blandishments. Sweet Cora, I am your own true knight!"

He sought to caress her, but with an ejaculation of terror the girl jumped to her feet and sped to the furthest wall.

Blending a hiccup with a laugh, he rose to follow her; but his steps were unsteady, and she evaded him, and ran screaming about the apartment.

Tortured beyond endurance by savage jealousy, the Indian girl leaped to her feet, and with drawn dagger rushed upon her rival.

Cora's peril partly sobered Grayson. He was not near enough to prevent the tragedy in any other way. Without a moment's hesitation he drew a pistol and fired.

Wa-he-ta sunk at Cora's feet.

Even this could not dissuade Grayson from his purpose. As if nothing had happened, he again approached the shrinking girl.

Wild with fear she rushed to the dwarf, and sinking upon her knees at his feet, she cried:

"Save me! oh, save me!"

The dwarf had seen his child shot down by the hand that had never dealt him aught but injury, and now the woman whom he loved more than anything else on earth, or in heaven, was appealing to him from her knees for protection from a monster whose spiritual deformity was only equaled by the fairness of its physical tenement.

With a rasping, tearing snarl, the long-pent fury of the dwarf fiend burst forth.

Grayson saw coming doom in the bloodshot eyes that seemed to dart living flame—in the foam-flecked lips, drawn back from teeth like fangs—in the fingers, crooked like the talons of some bird of prey.

Again his pistol spoke; and the ball took effect in the misshapen trunk of the human monster, for he uttered a scream like a wild animal wounded to the death. But it did not check his terrible onset.

The next instant Ethelbert Grayson was down on his back, with those claw-like fingers clutching his throat, and alternately raising his head and dashing it against the rocky floor of the cavern; while the dwarf fiend, free at last from the strange thralldom in which he had been held, gibed in maniac glee, and all the while his lips, dripping blood-crimsoned foam, went, in their horrible fashion:

Sluff! sluff! sluff!

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN INDIAN GIRL'S DEVOTION.

THERE was a rush of hurried feet through the darkened passage, and voices calling to one another. Then George Everett followed by Mrs. Preston and a crowd of men, burst into the apartment.

From her knees Cora saw her lover, and extended her arms to him mutely. He sprung forward and caught her to his breast, when she fainted dead away.

But she was safe, now—oh, she was safe! What danger could find her out on his stout heart?

Strong hands sought to tear the dwarf fiend from his prey; but it was found impossible. His fingers were locked about the throat they clasped with the vise-like grip of a drowning man. He took no cognizance of the men who surrounded him with horrified faces, and sought to stay his terrible work. As long as life lasted the muscles of his arms relaxed and contracted, shaking back and forth the head of his victim. When both were dead his grip did not relax.

So perished a moral monster with a fair body, and a physical monster with a soul not wholly devoid of that tenderness and love which link humanity with its God. Who shall say what even the dwarf fiend might have been, surrounded by the influences and cherished by the ties that other men hold lightly, not knowing their value.

But another scene was to be enacted. Those rude men were thrilled by a spectacle not every day witnessed.

While they were still looking with scarcely repressed shudders at the two figures so terribly linked together in death, some one uttered a sudden cry. Following the direction of his eyes, they all saw it, and grew pale.

The Indian girl, with the blood trickling from her bosom, was creeping on hands and knees across the floor of the cavern. Her destination was evident. Her eyes were fixed upon Ethelbert Grayson's face. She was holding death at arm's length by the power of her great love until she should get to him.

"Stand aside, men, for God's sake! Do not interfere with her!" cried a voice.

And all shrunk back, leaving her path clear.

She gained his side, and with her weak hand sought to take the dwarf's fingers from his throat. Then she looked at the men, with an inarticulate, sobbing murmur on her lips.

"Oh, God!" said an awe-struck voice, and all turned their faces away from the piteous spectacle.

The girl seemed to realize their helplessness, and a tear of resignation fell from her eyes upon the suffocation-discolored face of the man she had loved with a devotion akin to worship.

With her arms fast palsying in death she clasped his body to her faithful heart; and so, her cheek to his, her life exhaled, with every breath a mute whisper of forgiving love.

In the Great Award, does such love count for nothing with a God whose name is Love?

Cora Preston's first disappearance was due to her own father. In his half-demented state, he had overheard a conversation between the dwarf and his cat's-paw, Bradley, and understood just enough to know that she was in danger. Mistaking George Everett for one of the conspirators, he had shot him and carried off Cora. He had left her on the open prairie, to return for his wife, which had been prevented by the dwarf stunning and robbing him.

This explanation was reached only many months later, when his mind gradually regained its tone under the gentle ministrations of his daughter. Then too he revealed the location of the secret cache of the gold he had accumulated, and yielded up his rich claim in Pike's Peak to his son-in-law, George Preston.

But Cora's love for dear old Boston prevailed upon them all to return to their early home, when the physician had pronounced Mrs. Preston's health thoroughly restored by the life-giving climate of Denver.

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